LINER NOTES: AESTHETICS OF CAPITALISM AND RESISTANCE IN CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE MUSIC

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LINER NOTES: AESTHETICS OF CAPITALISM AND RESISTANCE IN CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE MUSIC

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This dissertation hypothesizes that capitalism can be understood as an aesthetic through an examination and comparison of three music life worlds in contemporary Japan: traditional, popular, and underground. Through ethnographic fieldwork-based immersion in each musical world for nearly four years, the research presented here concludes that capitalism's alienating aesthetic is naturally counteracted by aesthetics of community-based resistance, which blur and re-organize the generic boundaries typically associated with these three musics. By conceptualizing capitalism -- and socio-economics on whole – as an aesthetic, this dissertation ultimately claims an activist stance, showing by way of these rather dramatic case studies the self-destructive nature of capitalistic enterprise, and its effects on musical styles and performance, as well as community and identity in Japan and beyond.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Prior to undertaking doctoral studies in Musicology at Cornell in 2011, Jillian Marshall studied East Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago, where she graduated with double honors. Jillian has also studied with other institutions, notably Princeton University through the Princeton in Beijing Program (PiB, 2007), and Columbia University through the Kyoto Consortium of Japanese Studies at Doshisha University (KCJS, 2012). Her interest in the music of Japan was piqued during her initial two-year tenure in the country, when she worked as a middle school English teacher in a rural fishing village. Other research interests include Marxism, activist scholarship, and the broader relationship between music and society, particularly in societies of drastic upheaval (such as China, the former USSR, and Mexico). In addition to teaching, Jillian is a dancer, musician, and writer, with aspirations to cultivate these vocational possibilities to their fullest potential. She also has been happily working as a waitress since her time at Cornell.

For Mayuko Ogawa

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Acknowledgements, OR a stream of consciousness ish-rant written at 4:30 am on cold leftover coffee from Temple of Zeus about everyone who contributed to this project in any way

To blatantly rip off a brilliant quip by my sister – who always has been, and always will be, the coolest, smartest, most beautiful, most badass person on the planet[1] -- in her master's thesis, anyone who said they wrote their dissertation alone is a liar. So, Brooke… we've long retired our one-for-one competitiveness, but if it weren't for that, would we have done any of the crazy shit we've pulled off over the years? Look, driving the 18-wheeler was really next level, and with that bold play you truly BLEW UP THE GAME. It's safe to say I'll never do that--and the world is better off for it. I recall you saying the same thing about getting a PhD – that it was a quixotic commitment beyond anything you'd want to do at this point in your life. No offense—cuz getting a PhD definitely ain't for everyone – but something tells me it might be better for the world that you opted out of this track, too, haha.[2] Potato potahto, right? Anyway, thanks for pushing me to be the best version of myself, way back to when we were kids on the Ridge playing all of our wacky games and weird competitions with each other. I was in it to win it, you know, and whenever I actually did it brought such satisfaction because you are, objectively, the best. Now that we're older it's nice that we're not keeping score anymore, but in any case I still think you're the best. And I *definitely* could not have written this thing if it

[1] After completing her master's thesis in cultural anthropology on the idea of home for long-distance truck drivers – which included fieldwork wherein she DROVE AN 18-WHEELER – Brooke Marshall moved to Sub-Saharan Africa as a Peace Corps Volunteer. Then she thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail, moved to ANTARCTICA, and is currently finishing a cross-country bike tour to visit colleges and advocate for admissions policies that would better serve her former students in rural Malawi. Oh, and she's moving BACK to Antarctica in August. GodDAMN, hoss.

[2] What I wouldn't give to have been a fly on the wall when Kristie Bledsoe walked in your room to ask if you were OK, LOL. #marshalltough

weren't for your support and understanding—especially during the Padma Days. You blazed the trail, man.

But all that aside, I'm truthfully still kind of enraged about those times in Trivial Pursuit when you claimed I cheated for getting the answers right. You were *incredulous* that I knew who the "poor man's Norman Rockwell" was. But like, OF COURSE it was Andrew Wyeth… come on, man. I mean, we had that giant print of *Christina's World* up; it was just sound logical deduction. Plus, the dude painted all broken down houses and shit. ARG!!! And it was for a pie, too!! Do you promise to not play so nasty now that I'm about to get this frickin' doctorate???

JK. Love you, sis.[3]

OK, anyway, speaking about trails and (blue) blazes, to Dad: the man, the myth, the legend. Thank you for supporting my education throughout the years. I wouldn't have been able to study abroad with Princeton in Beijing back in 2007, and because of you it could happen—and we all know that trip changed my life, so thank you. Same thing with that last $3000 back in October. Clutch. Look Dad, you were tough, and sometimes outrageous and totally out of touch, but in the end it all worked out, right? You're a raw genius, straight-up *Good Will Hunting* style—and I stand by my theory that you were a professor in a past life, because you always had just the right questions to ask along the way to make me feel supported, and to help me relax about this whole gig. I love you, Pops. You're my hero. Plus, Spacey 8's has got to be some kind of training ground for sheer logical abilities… I swear, getting

[3] PS: "… you're telling me you can't read *any* Cyrillic?" So us.

good at that game was more educational than some parts of college. The waterfront at Revere, Mass... that's when you knew, and when the torch was handed down.

To Mom: thank you for the endless support, good GOD. Your cute little notes. If it weren't for your postcards, your care, those packages where you spend 7 dollars to send me a 5 dollar gift card to Subway or Dunkin' Donuts, and how proud you are of me (and Brooke—I know how you like to keep it fair), I don't know where I'd be. You always believed we could do anything, and here we are. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance,* man. That shit about Phaedrus and Quality really dragged on, didn't it? Lol. You're extremely intelligent, and I'm lucky to have gotten some of your brains. I appreciate that you really wanted to know about the content of my dissertation, like, word-for-word… and I *especially* appreciated that you finally understood when I explained that it wasn't personal, but that I just wanted to have fun when we chat and not discuss the ins-and-outs of postmodern theory with you, lol. PARLOR TRICKS, anyone? You're the best, and I couldn't have done this without you, your encouragement, and your boundless energy of spring flowers. You're an inspiration.

Lee: Sup hoss? Thanks. Less is more. Love you. Also, sup Stephanie, Ryan, Kristie, Dave, and Olivia?

PRECIOUS PATTY!! … hey, Goddrick…

And thanks all around for everyone in the family: special shout-outs to Aunt Jo-Ann (and Uncle Dean), who bought us school supplies when we were young, and for everyone else in our crazy, wacky, tiny assemblage. On both sides. Another shout-out to the 86-year-old Gramma Marshall for the following message: "Just make up your mind you r doing nothing, o, nada until

you finish that necessary job u have been avoiding. You will feel so free you will wish u had done it ages ago. Get on the stick. Love u."

LOL. Amazing.

To Heidi and Ernie Forte (and Alexis!): thank you for inviting us down to Martha's Vineyard every summer. Although it was intimidating at first with all that Lacoste and Ralph Lauren stuff all those Kennedy-types wore on the ferry, the island soon became a home. Ernie, our late-night political discussions in my early adolescence about capitalism *changed the course of my life forever*. Seriously, have you seen the title of this thing? As a middle- and high-schooler, you were the first adult to ever take my critiques on capitalism seriously. The next morning, hearing you tell Mom and Heidi that "Brooke and Jill are RADICALS," and with such pride in your voice… that was formative. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

Also, yo, thanks to my homeboy Henry David Thoreau. The "Economy" section of *Walden: Life in the Woods* changed my life, too—and is probably what got me fired from Zachary's Pizza when I was 16 ("I don't wanna sell my soul for money, man!") #transcendantalismclub But really, sup Vinny? … did you just say 'sup' to a locker? My childhood best friend, and my original interlocutor for anti-capitalist, anti-government sentiment. So proud of you for doing your thing; you inspire me. Live the DREAM!

Also, to Abigail: thank you for friendship, your energy. Couldn't have done it without your positive vibes all these years. You're a bowl of ice cream with sprinkles on top.

Bonnie!! If it weren't for you, I wouldn't have studied Chinese. And if I didn't go to China, I never would have gone to Japan. Gah, I miss you! Let's hang out soon.

To the family at Hai Hong Restaurant—my family in Ithaca. Where to start? You've fed me, sheltered me, helped me make money, and even tried to clothe me over the past two and a half years (although we gotta get real, you keep trying to give me these old clothes you find in your houses and I'm a foot taller than all of you. Lol, what's that even about? Even Li Fang is giving me stuff now, lollll.) Helen: you're a boss, and even though you perpetually scheduled me for five hours more a week then I could feasibly work, your quiet support has meant more than you know. Boss: you're THE boss, and your healthy meals kept me going. mmGOI. Eddie… the lion, the happiness maker, the warm campfire, the brave and proud man who taught me how to fight back with dignity. You know your place in my heart, and its utter permanence. Thomas: you are a hustler, straight-up, and I respect the hell out of you, lol. I learned everything I know about the art of waiting tables from you (and my mom, of course, but you know what I mean. Adding more wine to my friend's glass? Classy touch. You read that vibe IMMEDIETLY). Li… the indomitable work horse, and my sweet auntie <3 Sunday evenings with you were the perfect way to end the week. **我真**爱你。谢谢你教我广东话, 。**在大八街**请你吃点心Peipei, your silly smile and our crazy dance moves are what make us the Dim Sum Dream Team. I actually really like it when you call me "so stupid-ah," lolololol. And "July"? As far as I'm concerned, that *is* how you spell my name. Lun, you're fresh energy and I appreciate that. Joe and Anne... Vietnam Restaurant is a sanctuary when the woks get too hot over in Hai Hong, if you know what I mean. Ping and Moe-- you're sweet and you make me smile. Matthew: "He really want to marry it." LOL!!! Shannon, eating all the broken fortune cookies together ;) Li Fang, you are one hell of an arm wrestler.[4] Albert—meditation pals, Calvin and Hobbes pals, dinner pals. Annie

[4] 请别给你的鸡鸡肉！！

and my li'l buddy CALEB <3, for keeping things spicy, real, and multi-dimensional-- and for the effervescent vibes of this beautiful young child. And last, but not least, Soth: the comedian of the whole joint. Where would we be without you? I really do pray you hit the lotto someday, and make all those dreams come true. Just promise me you won't spend it on energy drinks…

"Just making fun!"

Shout-out to the gang at Apollo, and the network of Cantonese people that come in to hang out whose names I don't know, but are always friendly…

Ugh, I can't even express how much Hai Hong has meant to me during my time in Ithaca. Total game-changer. This dissertation would absolutely not exist if it weren't for you. I'd be starving, a bag of bones… I am so lucky to know you all, and not only because you make crazy-delicious food and insist on fattening me up. **哎呀，吃**饭吃饭! And thanks for putting up with me when I got stressed from school and work and couldn't deal.

我们**不一**样!

OK, my friends. The best people I know. Erica immediately comes to mind, not least because we are CCT's (grrrl) but because of her patience, and the example she continually set since I came here. One year ahead, and with the best advice. My amazing cohort--- Michael, Aya, Annalise, and of course, Andrew – who are not just mere war buddies, but friends for life. Blood siblings; soul mates. Can't even get into it, but you guys know. Mack—sup? Jordan—the only person I can shoot the shit with about getting on some IN-surance and heading to DE-troit 'round these parts. Matt Hall, writing buddy extraordinaire, and with that telepathic sensitivity of knowing exactly when to take a break and talk about literally anything (also, sup Lizzy!).

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And although she wasn't at Cornell, HUGE SHOUT OUT to EMILY O: possibly my number one fan (and the feeling is MUTUAL), but more than that, my life partner, my business partner, and… you know, just in general, my partner in crime. Thanks for giving a shit, hoss. #GETHIP

Professors… Steve Pond. You know what's up. My chair, the solid and quiet force of support who always made the time, all seven years. Thank you for not giving up on me #sunybinghamtongfall2018yo. Also, thanks for Deixa Sambar. Sorry I showed up late so many times, but really, it turned out to be one of the best souvenirs of this whole Cornell gig. Roger—the quicksilver wordsmith, the sleuth bibliographer, the brain-stormer extraordinaire—and the one who got me into this whole musicology thing to begin with. Sigh, the UChicago days were pretty fun, weren't they? You're one of the most brilliant people out there, period. #foxnothedgehog. Naoki—the wizard of Asian Studies, the detonator of truth-bombs (ala "Well, of course, Japan is a fascist society" during my A exam) that just about sums it all up. My respect for you is deep, and I'm honored to have had the chance to work with a living legend. Special shout-out to Paul Merrill, who cares about his many, many students with equal intensity… and for one of the most fun semesters I've ever had teaching (yes, even in

comparison to my own class—high praise). Also, tri-tone substitutions in tonic minor kind of blew my mind. Big ups to Alejandro Madrid, who was here for the journey, and who let me know about the Fulbright-mtvU Fellowship that ultimately changed my life.

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Yo, thank you to the MAN Chuck Caccioppo, for the opportunity to play your dope music on trumpet. Club B20, y'all. Let's do some more of that soon.

Oh wow, thank you from the bottom of my heart to the teachers at Fairfield Center School in Vermont. Mrs. B-C, Mrs. and Mr. Pigeon, Mrs. Chaput, and especially Ms. Scott… you

literally saved my life. School, and music, were (and are) everything to me. Thank you for understanding, without saying anything… you protected me.

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Anne and Walter—and baby Spence. You fed me, you took care of me, and I love you and can't wait to pay it forward. Anne, your jokes are unparalleled. HEY JARED…

And now, the Japan crew.

First and foremost, to LILY, aka BABA, aka my BROTHER, SISTER, MOTHER, LOVER, HATER, HEALER, AFFLICTOR, TEACHER, GIVER, TAKER… what else did we have on that list? Our GCHATS and CMAILS, forever classified though they shall remain, are the *original* field notes on Japan. The hard copy, y'all. Truly, this is a joint project… everything I know about Japan has been scrumptiously fact-checked by you. All those trips we went on… lol. Thank you can't even express it. You know what's up. I still can't believe I spent A THOUSAND DOLLARS in two days on the Nagano trip… and did we *seriously* consider going to Fukushima POST-311 for "Marine Day?" You seemed disappointed when I finally said that it might not be the best idea. That's next level, man. PS: NAGOYA, INDONESIA!!

Cutie Yumiko, how I miss your smile—thank you for making the Concrete Jungle sweet. Let's lunch the next time I'm back in Tokyo! Pat, thanks for the fun times up in Akita, and for being a host extraordinaire. Charlotte… you're a rainbow! Road tripping to Aomori was the highlight the summer of 2010, and it's because of you that I got to see Akita (and fall in love with the place at first sight). The Usami Family: you're lovely, and the trip to Nara was magical.

To all my friends in the underground… wow, this is emotional. I'm not sure what to say, except thank you—and you know this is all for you, and wouldn't have happened without you. Special shout-outs to Sachiko, Nanae, Violent Onsen Geisha, Mikey, Keito, Napalm-san (lol), Batico and PortaL, Limitoss, Naco and USK, Mari-chan… Hayato. I can't do this. Aki-chan. Maya-chan. JOHN! Where are you these days? Sei-san. Even Ryo, man, at the end of the day. You snuck me in that van to go to GG. Soybeans… changed my life. Nao-chan, Noiko-san, ahhh. Mae-chan, Miso-chan, Kazumi-chan… the gang at Kero Factory down in Matsuyama. Cohshi, you came my show on literally no notice. Thanks. Seriously. This is too emotional and I can't really deal with it right now.

Even though it turned into what it did, to Masayuki… thank you. It changed my life, and I'm better for it. Hope the same is true for you, too.

Omg, HITOMI KASHIO-- on Sunday or otherwise, lol. Soul sisters… thank you for stepping into my life, and for the amazing opportunity to work at your CAFÉ BAR. My last night, when that dentist guy came in and I poured myself a drink from his bottle of *shochu* at thirty bucks a glass on his dime (or yen, as it were) with a cheerfulいただきます!... and you declared: "JIRU-CHAN, YOU'RE OFFICIALLY A HOSTESS! I TAUGHT YOU WELL!" That's next level. I miss you.

You're just the best, and it's meant to be; we're waiting for you in New York City. Also, thank you to MISAWA-SAN! Lol.

To the guys at Mole Music… damn, thank you. Having a record shop close by to cruise is essential to my well-being, and you guys were pinch hitters. Arthur Russell… DOPE. Mitsuki, our impromptu night out in Tamatsukuri was real; glad there was a kindred spirit in the so-called "underground." Shindo, the moment when you brought in *Exodus* during your set at Club Stomp was one of the best dance moments of my life. I was on cloud nine, and you felt that vibe.

Osaka… sigh. To the old madams in Imazato who recognized me two years later when I showed up on a bicycle to the bathhouse, and for all our exchanges afterward. We never acknowledged that I know what you do for a living, but I don't actually care, and you eventually seemed to get that-- you bought me juice after hitting up the sauna! Seriously, to everyone at the Nishiki-yu bathhouse… I biked all the way to Imazato Shinchi from Tani-6, even when it was freezing cold, because there is no other *sento* for me. After all, Imazato Shinchi was my first home in Osaka… I could always go there when I was feeling blue and get lifted (and seriously, how many Americans can say that about the secret red light district in the far reaches of Osaka's Koreatown, where all the *burakumin* live?).

This is the Japan I love…

And to Matsumura-san… thank you for being the first man in Japan to outright call me a genius. ABOUT TIME, YO, I'm over of all that "kawaii" stuff. Lol, just kidding. But seriously, our encounters were always brightened my week when I was living in Tani-6. You are hilarious—

and you broke all of my (albeit limited) conceptions about male ballerinas. Thanks for letting me play your piano for cheap, and for free by the end… even if you didn't quite jive with the whole tone sections in "The Alcotts." Now, you just gotta get hip and finally check out Hitomi's Therapy.

！ドキ

To the people who run that noodle shop in Tokyo with the best vegetable tempura I've ever had… you guys are so sweet. As usual I don't remember your name, but you not only know mine but always treat me to the best company whenever I stop by. You don't have to bow so low, it's just me! And you know, it's the little things like that that made life in the Mad City bearable… Oimachi was home because of such simply beautiful encounters. I was on the BRINK for a while in 2015, and there were times I went in the noodle shop just to say hi.

Something tells me you got that.

Shigeko-san, Numakura-san, and Oide-san… what is there even to say? To have had the privilege of dancing with three Akita Bijin in Nishimonai are experiences of a lifetime. And it's not over… next year, right? Thank you from the bottom of my heart, especially to you, Shigeko-san for even making dancing in Nishimonai possible. Like, for real, *it wouldn't have been possible* had you not taken a chance on the wacky foreigner. "Hello *giggle* … so anyway, who are you, and um… yeah, what are you doing here?" Also, KU-TANNNN!!!! You three made this all possible. まだ練習しなくちゃ行けないですが。。これからもよろぴく<3

To everyone on Awaji… my first home in Japan, and my lifetime home in Japan. Minatsu, my BEST 日本人FRIEND. ！！愛してるぞぉぉぉぉぉ Cain… brothers to the end.

#brokedownpalace. Shit. You guys took care of me. I mean, fighting over who gets to treat whom to dinner-- how lucky are we? Karaoke with you two is literally one of my favorite things on the planet.ありがとう、君がいてくれて本当ようかったよ/どんなときだって笑っていられる. Paul and Dayna, what is there to say? There's gotta be some fengshui between Fukura and Mihara that made our connection so magical. It IS. It DOES. It HAHS… NOW YOU'RE TALKIN'. Saadiqa, wherever you are I hope you're still groovin' out to S'Africa's finest club bangers.

The Miyamotos—sparkling Christmas lights in my life, the best surprise at the right time. Looking forward to catching up soon… my Japanese family.

Noguchi-sensei… your companionship is one of the most beautiful things in this galaxy.

何も言わずに、理解して頂きました。「今日も頑張りましたか？」

その手紙をもらうことは、人生の中で一番大切なことの一つです。

The Fujitas, the Sakamotos <3 The Kikukawas. The lady who runs the chicken shack who remembered me four years later and shouted, "Where ya been, Jiru-chan??"

Ahh… this is the Japan I love…

And to all my former students at Nandan and Nushima… and especially to Segawa Chiho.

Sending you love, and hope you're resting in peace wherever you are.

Ah, I learned everything I know about Japan from you guys.

Alright, who am I missing? Oh yeah, thanks to the Temple of Zeus people. Like most PhD students in the humanities, I wrote a lot of and I edited *all* of my dissertation at this cute café, both before and after the move (and spent a large chunk my stipend there over the years, lol), under the kind watch of some lovely people.

"Lovely" is a deliberate word.

Thanks for the light at the end of the tunnel. And, of course, the caffeine…

And last, but not least…

Mayuko Ogawa, who started it all with that one magical night in Roppongi, back in 2007.

。一目惚れは本当だよ。心から、ありがとう

This is for you.

Notes on the Text:

1) To protect the privacy of the people and places in this dissertation, most names and place names have been changed.
2) Japanese names are written in the Japanese fashion (surname, given name).
3) Some commonly used Japanese words:
    a. *en:* a connection, a happy non-accident, a funny coincidence that pushes you to pursue a relationship or a certain path
    b. *gaijin*: literally means "outside person"; slang for "foreigner"
    c. *sempai*: one's senior, or mentor
    d. *kouhai*: one's junior, or apprentice
    e. *obon*: an annual Buddhist holiday that celebrates one's ancestors and deceased family members

Introduction

If you read Miles Davis' autobiography as told to Quincey Troupe, you instantly feel like you're *in*. You've been invited to sit around a campfire to hear Miles Davis himself set the record straight about… life, really. This is the real-deal, you-had-to-be-there, hard copy of jazz's aesthetic and social history.[5]

The book opens with a single word: *Listen.*

Davis' stories, which include tales of music, friendships, romance, and regrets, portray a full portrait of the times. Beyond the narrative itself, perhaps the most striking aspect of this storytelling is Quincey Troupe's account of it. Make no mistake, this material is presented to you as-is. Capturing Davis' voice pause for pause, word choice for word choice, the writing itself is as musical as Miles, creating a powerful overall effect: by letting this legendary musician speak for himself, Troupe respects the autonomy of his interlocutor by representing him as objectively as possible.

Yet herein lay two layers of paradox. For one, Davis' account of jazz's history is by no means objective, not least because this is neither history nor ethnography, but ("auto")biography. In terms of both his music and lifestyle, Davis was truly one of a kind, and his perspective is all his own; ask another jazzer, and you'd surely get a much different aesthetic

[5] Before we go any further, it must be acknowledged that Davis has been accused of plagiarizing his own autobiography. As Ken Prouty points out, some of Davis' anecdotes might not have been his own experiences, and his "uncooperative silences" during the course of the books writing might have forced Quincey Troupe to fill in the gaps, so to speak. That said, Troupe himself is suspected of having borrowed material from Jack Chamber's second volume biography. All the same, I include *Miles: The Autobiography* here as an example of the challenges presented when writing objectively about music; indeed, these controversies merely prove the point. See: https://journals.equinoxpub.com/index.php/JAZZ/article/view/8367

and social history of jazz. And at the same time that the writing lets Davis speak for himself, Troupe's presence is acutely felt in the commas, italics, and other syntactic choices that bely a fundamental interference: the life story of Miles Davis presented to you is not objective—that is, pure, untainted, as is.

But on the other hand, if Miles Davis doesn't get at least some authoritative say about jazz, then who does?

--

Primary Theoretical Structures

Central Thesis

In the dissertation that follows, I discuss the aesthetics and sociality of three music lifeworlds in contemporary Japan: popular (J-pop), traditional, and underground styles. Although seemingly contrasting in terms of surface aesthetic, I argue that a comparison of these styles in their performative and social contexts reveals a common theme: each musical scene operates in direct response to the forces of capitalism in contemporary Japan. Specifically, I conclude that J-pop has an alienated, divided fan culture centered around consumerism and government-serving tropes of nationalism that ultimately speak to trends in a global popular music industry. Meanwhile, Japan's traditional and underground music scenes are unexpectedly connected if not by sound, then by the communities that form to perform, listen to, and ultimately protect themselves against the alienating forces of capitalism (and its music).

On Aesthetics, Genre, and "Late Capitalism"

My work adds to a body of scholarship that conceptualizes "aesthetics" in terms of social function, rather than sonic or visual tropes that can be organized under the broader umbrella of "genre". In *Head Hunters: The Making of Jazz's First Platinum Album,* Steven Pond explores the social politics of fusion jazz, and concludes that conceptualizing jazz in terms of a strict genre that ultimately miss the point. "We should direct our attention to jazz as a *practice,* rather than as a text," he writes, adding: "Whether the music is improvisational or arranged, subdivided in swing- or straight-eights, funky, sophisticated, accessible, obtuse, modal, or rock-inflected, *jazz happens as a process*."[6] Thomas Turino similarly points out that music is made not necessarily to engineer a particular sound, but as a response to "the goals, values, practices, and styles of actors within a given [musical] field that are shaped by their conceptions of the *ideologies and contexts of reception* and the purposes of music within that field."[7] Veit Erlmann has echoed this idea in his works on globalization and African popular music. In "How Beautiful is Small? Music, Globalization, and the Aesthetic of the Local," he sees aesthetics as a kind of ethical system:

> Aesthetic communities… for Kant are more of an idea, a promise, than they are a concrete reality. What keeps aesthetic communities alive is that this promise is never fulfilled. Like clouds, they must disappear the moment they take shape. Kant's notion of the aesthetic community is still very much with us today. It is a particularly prophetic and astute description, it seems to me, of the consumer societies in the west. Seen this way, this present-day meaning of aesthetic is not limited to the arts… Aesthetics become ethics of modern human existence in which subjects and communities model

[6] Steven Pond, *Head Hunters: The Making of Jazz's First Platinum Album* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 189.
[7] Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 27.

> themselves on an epistemology of... the play of forms instead of the actualization of some existential truth.[8]

Last, but certainly not least, Theodor Adorno's extensive writings on aesthetic theory similarly suggest that aesthetics are, at their core, social phenomena. He writes: "The shaft that art directs at society is itself social; it is a counterpressure to the force exerted by the body social; like inner-aesthetic progress, which is progress in productive and, above all, technical forces, this counterpressure is bound up with progress of extra-aesthetic productive forces."[9] In fact, Adorno's observation that aesthetics both create a "body social" and a counterforce is central to my conceptualization of music in contemporary Japan, which I understand as fundamentally forming two camps: the aesthetics of capitalism (embodied by J-pop), and the aesthetics of resistance (embodied by traditional and underground music).

Throughout this dissertation, I refer to Japanese society (and, obliquely, the United States) as "late-capitalist." My meaning here is not necessarily to criticize capitalism from a moralist perspective, but rather to show that its consequences are becoming increasingly apparent – and urgent – in societies where this socio-economic system has had time to incubate. Worth pointing out that the social implications of capitalism are subsumed under the idea of postmodernism: a term more widely accepted than "capitalism" in academic circles, where Frederic Jameson points out "was, itself, always [considered] a funny word… [in fact,] just using the word – otherwise a neutral enough designation for an economic and social

[8] Veit Erlmann, "How Beautiful is Small? Music, Globalization, and the Aesthetic of the Local," *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, Vol 30 (1998): 12.
[9] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 33.

system on whose properties all sides agree—seemed to position you in a vaguely critical, suspicious, if not outright socialist stance."[10] However, the term "late capitalism," he argues, conveys "the sense that something has changed, that things are different, that we have gone through a transformation of the life world which is somehow decisive but incomparable with the older convulsions of modernization and industrialization, less perceptible and dramatic, somehow, but more permanent precisely because it is more thoroughgoing and all-pervasive."[11] The sense of breakdown, and the death of a temporal vision, he argues, joins late capitalist theory with postmodernism: inherently temporal in conception, and a general state of alienated malaise naturally wrought by capitalist forces.

Experience as Primary Source Data

The perspectives offered in this project are primarily derived from experiences had in the field, especially from 2014-2015, when I spent nine months in Tokyo and two months in Osaka. During this time, I went to upwards of three underground music shows a week, followed the media empires of J-pop superstars, interviewed government officials about Japan's popular culture industry, saw a J-pop variety show screening, and attended monthly dance lessons in Akita prefecture in order to perform in the *Nishimonai bon odori* Buddhist festival of the dead, held every August. I subsequently returned to Japan for subsequent field trips in August of 2016, and from August of 2017 to January of 2018, during which I spent the bulk of my time in Osaka, with excursions to field sites (which had become personal hang-out spots) in Tokyo and

[10] Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, xxi.
[11] Ibid.

in the rural, northern Akita prefecture. These times in Japan, along with other trips and long-term stays that had nothing explicitly to do with my research, have all informed my project insofar that they have all contributed to my understanding of Japan – its society, its people, and its music. In addition to experience, the analysis presented in my dissertation is also derived from what I conceptualize as "contemporary archaeological artifacts": magazines, videos, flyers, CDs, music videos, newspapers, gossip columns, and other such materials that I believe reveal much about contemporary society, and the lifeworlds from which these artifacts come.

Perhaps because my initial two years in Japan were before I became a "Japanist," I conceptualize experience as primary source material. Ethnomusicologist Timothy Rice argues that conceptualizing the field itself as the origin of theory is perhaps the only way to bring together a discipline otherwise divided by region, critical approaches, and risks of (academic) colonialism. In "Toward a Meditation of Field Methods and Field Experience in Ethnomusicology," he writes:

> [The field] is a place filled with insiders who share views about music, musical practices, and a host of other things. It is the place where we outsiders must go to encounter these insiders and their culture, and to explain to other outsiders the relationship between music and culture posited by our theories. It is, above all, the primary place of knowing in ethnomusicology, a place privileged epistemologically by the theory that constructs it as the locus where methods will be applied to demonstrate the truth of our theory that music is a part of culture.[12]

So, although I undertook my fieldwork with hypotheses and research questions, the theoretical frameworks I work with in the proceeding chapters – postmodernism, Marxist perspectives on late capitalism and consumer culture, phenomenology, tradition – have ultimately been

[12] Timothy Rice, "Toward a Meditation of Field Methods and Field Experience in Ethnomusicology," in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives in Fieldwork for Ethnomusicology*, ed. Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 46.

retroactively applied to the experiences I've had in Japan over the years to better understand them. In line with Rice's advice, I have chosen to let this project define itself *as* my theoretical stance.

Indeed, my project evolved from a study of the taiko drumming in Japan's annual *obon* festivals to include popular and underground music; eventually, it became apparent that considering such seemingly different musical perspectives was essential to understanding Japanese society at large—as best as any one person can. Given the experiences I have had in Japan, however – ranging from school teacher to university student, researcher to bohemian drifter, traditional dancer to underground raver to interviewer, from bartender to DJ to artist to musician to writer – my perspectives on Japanese society are at least well-rounded.

Fig. 1: A snapshot of the diverse range of people I've met in Japan: government officials, preservationists, and a dominatrix.

This, by the way, is why I bring Miles Davis' autobiography into the discussion. Although I am not and never will be Japanese—and acknowledge with humility that this society and culture

will always remain elusive – if my perspectives on Japan are still said to be inherently from an "outsider," then who *is* an insider?

Objectivity and Representation in Ethnographic Writing

All the same, claiming any experience -- no matter how variegated -- to be "definitive" or "objective" is fallacious. Indeed, objectivity and representation as they relate to ethnographic writing about music is perhaps the central theoretical challenge that the ethnomusicologist must tackle. As Deborah Wong has pointed out,

> The problems with ethnography aren't new and haven't changed: they include the false binary of the insider/outsider, colonial baggage, and the empiricism still lurking behind a solidly humanistic anthropology and ethnomusicology… Ethnomusicologists [need] 1) to make sure that we are consistently engaged in the practice of critical ethnography and 2) to focus explicitly on creating performative ethnographies while acknowledging the place of auto-ethnography in our methodologies.[13]

The ethnomusicologist is thus dually tasked with immersing herself within and critically considering a musical project, without letting her own perceptions, impressions, and opinions overpower those of her interlocutors. After all, to prioritize her own conclusions would replicate unsavory colonialist dynamics, wherein a "researcher" studies "subjects" and reports her findings back to the distant, clinical archive. The issue, then, becomes one of striking a balance somewhere between owning and erasing one's ethnographic presence. What is the value of ethnographic research at all if our presence, so often understood as a block to objectivity, must be so hotly negotiated?

[13] Deborah Wong, "Moving: From Performance to Performance Ethnography and Back Again," in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives in Fieldwork for Ethnomusicology*, ed. Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 77.

Solipsistic Ethnography

I propose that we reframe the question by recognizing that the very quest for objectivity is quixotic. Rather than attempting to make the *sub*jective *ob*jective, I argue that recognizing the fallacy of objectivity is where the ethnographer can exercise unbiased reasoning. In other words, if the only thing we know is that our experiences are colored by our perceptions, then the ethnographer should instead seek to become aware of the factors that influence her reality. I call this framework "solipsistic ethnography," which draws on the eponymous branch of philosophy that Albert Johnstone defines as:

> …the thesis that a necessary condition for the existence of anything in the world is one's own awareness of it. Consequently, to qualify as a solipsist it suffices to make the claim that the everyday world exists only to the extent that one is aware of it… what is observed may be illusory; hence, there is cause to suspend judgment on any claim that what is perceived is really what it seems to be.[14]

Solipsism understands reality as an illusion—one that's potentially understood differently by every person. As such, judgments about reality are seen as projections, rather than conclusions evincing some kind of universal truth; there are always variables at play. Thomas Turnio makes this point in his book *Music as Social Life*, noting that "the body we are born with and the social environment we are born into shape our individual constellation of habits… These experiences (of body + social environment) create habits… to conceptualize [oneself] in a particular way]."[15] Indeed, awareness of these so-called "habits" (or, perhaps, habitus) is essential in taking a solipsistic approach to ethnography; applied to ethnographic writing, this stance mandates that

[14] Albert A. Johnstone, *Rationalized Epistemology: Taking Solipsism Seriously* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 2, 8.
[15] Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 100.

our own "habitual" particularities as fieldworkers precludes any field experience from being truly definitive.

At the same time, solipsistic ethnography utilizes critical thick description to shed light on how the theoretical arguments are framed. This ultimately evades the issue of ownership altogether by allowing readers to make their own conclusions about the material presented – which, in the case of ethnomusicology, is music's link to culture and society. My approach responds to experimental anthropological discourse that explores alternative writing techniques to bridge the gap between experience and culture. Clifford Geertz's *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture* immediately comes to mind, as does the work of James Clifford: pioneer of the reflexive ethnography boom in the 1980s and 1990s. In the introduction to the seminal *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography,* Clifford questions the idea of ethnographic truth presented in earlier anthropological works by urging ethnographers to understand their experience as "inherently *partial*—committed and incomplete… once built into ethnographic art, a rigorous sense of partiality can be a source of representational tact."[16] My conception of solipsistic ethnography similarly sees the ethnographic truth as incomplete, and seeks not only to offer representational tact, but also the logical backing provided by a theoretical philosophical framework that shows how ethnographic truth is always particular—and never universal.

One of the major critiques of reflexive ethnographic writing is that it's self-absorbed. Why should an audience care about a person's particular experience in the field—what

[16] James Clifford, "Introduction," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley (University of California Press, 1986), xxi.

contribution can navel-gazing make to a scholarly discussion? Andrew Sparkes, in "Auto-ethnography: Self-Indulgence or Something More?" wonders if this isn't an unfair generalization:

> Why not use different terms, such as self-knowing, self-respectful, or self-luminous? [Autoethnography can] include the following: the use of systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall; the inclusion of the researchers' vulnerable selves, emotions, body, and spirit; the production of evocative stories that create the effect of reality; the celebration of concrete experience and intimated detail… the featuring of multiple voices and the repositioning of readers and 'subjects' as coparticipants in dialogue, [and] the seeking of the practice of social science with the living of life.[17]

Here, Sparkes urges for the researcher's humanity to not be erased from the project, and argues that the emotional ups and downs of fieldwork, which are a natural part of going anywhere far from home (figuratively or literally), can provide more insight into our research topics. I agree with Sparkes, not necessarily because I see the value of relentlessly including the researcher's humanity in scholarly writing for its own sake, but because I believe that our humanity cannot be erased from our research in the first place.

While there is merit in the criticism that auto-ethnographic writing reads more like a diary than a scholarly discussion, explicitly theoretical ethnographic writings are not exempt from this risk either, particularly when it comes to the ethnographic vignette. Oftentimes disjointed from theoretical content, I cannot help but wonder about the author's intent in including these stories. Although saying so may seem cynical, many vignettes seem to serve no other clear purpose than proving that the author penetrated the insider/outsider divide, thereby claiming his academic territory or proving his authority to discuss the music. Such

[17] Andrew C. Sparkes, "Autoethnography: Self-Indulgence or Something More?" in *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, Aesthetics* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2001), 210-211.

writing not only replicates the problematic "subject/researcher" power dynamic, but also flattens the value of fieldwork in the first place.[18]

I argue that a solipsistic approach, which encourages objective reasoning about one's subjectivity (to the degree that this is possible) in the field is the key to integrating experience within theoretical writing. For example, Steven Feld's *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra* shows how a commitment to personal objectivity in ethnographic storytelling ultimately points the focus away from self, and toward broader debates. He writes: "I wanted to tell stories about how my life as a musician and researcher became critically entangled in other searching musical lives, lives whose detail, nuance, and difficult positioning mattered to me far beyond academic intrigue. I wanted to focus on the poetics of irony in the making of musical cosmopolitanism."[19] Important to note is that Feld's background as both an anthropologist and a jazz musician not only prepared him for this project, but enabled it in the first place.

An objective understanding of his particular circumstances thus allows us to interpret his experiences theoretically: what would happen not just to Steven Feld, but someone *like* him. Indeed, his awareness of his subjectivity leads him to value the theoretical potential of storytelling to the extent that the entire book reads as one long vignette. He opens with the following words: "I'm here to tell stories about encounters with jazz cosmopolitanism in Accra.

[18] Important to note is that the power dynamic between "subject" and "researcher" swings both ways. During my most recent stay in Japan in the fall and winter of 2017, I realized that a new dynamic between interlocutors-turned-friends had to be established—I was no longer a researcher of their lifeworld, and wanted to free myself from the hierarchy that assumed I'd erase my presence to absorb their knowledge as much as possible. After all of these years and experiences together, I wanted to be seen as a complex human being rather than a socially responsible "researcher"; besides, my research days had formally ended by then, anyway.

[19] Steven Feld, *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra: A Memoir of Five Musical Years in Ghana* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 6.

While luminous and vexing to me, I don't expect them to be as memorable or unsettling to you. But I do hope they will be productive of surprise and critical reflection, certainly about the shape of jazz as diasporic dialogue in an African urban modernity, and even more about jazz cosmopolitanism as musical intimacy."[20] I adopt the same approach in this dissertation, which at times might read more like a diary than a typical scholarly work—intentionally so.

Self as Laboratory: Reviewing Reflexive Approaches

In addition to theoretical philosophy, my conception of solipsistic ethnography builds on two subfields of ethnographic theory that conceptualize the self as a fruitful site of inquiry. These are auto-ethnography, where the researcher details her personal experiences in the field, and existential ethnography, where the division between the ethnographic and core self is challenged. Indeed, throughout the process of my fieldwork, my conception of "self" was challenged in my field sites of traditional, popular, and underground music scenes in Japan, perhaps because each scene is so different from one another. Solipsistic ethnography, then, is a theoretical catch-all for these variations in reflexive fieldwork methodology that each have a place in my project.

Auto-ethnography

Auto-ethnographic methodology is useful for immersive projects that concern the embodiment of creative and social performance. In the auto-ethnographic work *Sensational Knowledge: Embodying Japanese Culture through Dance,* Tomie Hahn meditates on the socio-cultural implications of transmission, while understanding her body as a scientific control that

[20] Ibid, 1.

gauges how deeply she has absorbed the dance on a corporeal level. As she encountered challenges and successes as a student of Japanese dance, she learned "how a community attends to the world and constructs its identity and art from shared sensibilities, shared sensual orientations… fieldwork experiences often directly reveal contrasting constructs of the reality that challenge our core sensibilities, changing the way we orient ourselves in the world."[21]

My own approach to learning traditional Japanese dance has similarly relied on auto-ethnographic methodology. Much like Hahn, observing my process from complete novice to three-year dance veteran in the annual Nishimonai *bon odori*, or Nishimonai Buddhist Festival of the Dead, revealed a lot about the nature of the music and dance, which was initially totally alien to my ears and body. Learning the elegant, deceptively simple steps of the festival's two dances, *ondo* and *ganke*, was punctuated with blocks that ultimately led to a realization: the only way I could learn this dance would be to both recognize, and let go of, my embodied American-ness to make room for an entirely different aesthetic intuition.

Through solipsistic reflexivity, the trouble I had moving my foot and leg in an unbroken line in those first months of dance lessons, for instance, was no longer a mere commentary on my dance skills, but an indication of the challenges naturally presented to someone like me—that is, a non-Japanese born in the twentieth century. Sweeping generalizations aside, many visitors to Japan are struck by what their eyes might see as a pigeon-toed walk, known as *uchimata hoko* in Japanese. Among other various media outlets that have inquired about this phenomenon, the Japan Times points out that *uchimata hoko* is considered graceful, elegant,

[21] Tomie Hahn, *Sensational Knowledge: Embodying Japanese Culture through Dance* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 5.

and feminine as it suggests the natural walk assumed while wearing a *kimono*.[22] Add in the fact that I haven't regularly worn *kimono* since childhood like many Japanese, and what initially appears as a personal tick soon becomes a jumping point into more inclusive discussion of aesthetic traditions, embodiment, transmission, and habitus. Following ethnomusicologist Mantle Hood's idea of bi-musicality, then, a study of my body as a scientific control while learning this dance – like Hahn – has allowed me to understand concrete aesthetics of Japanese traditional music and dance practices through comparison: in this case, the importance of mastering subtle details.

Moreover, conceptualizing my ethnographic presence as someone *like* me affords analysis into the politics of my presence. For instance, the head dance teacher at the Nishimonai Bon Odori Preservation Society was quite obviously uncomfortable with me and my project. During that year of fieldwork, she cleverly avoided my numerous attempts to arrange an interview, exchange messages, or even have an informal conversation after rehearsals.[23] Conceptualizing my presence within a broader context of globalization, then, provides insight into the politics of this notoriously conservative region of Japan and of Japanese tradition in the twenty-first century. Not to mention, this experience obliquely showed me what's at stake for the Nishimonai Preservation Society. After all, what's actually being preserved: the dance, or a value system that some fear might be going extinct as global capitalism continues to expand?

Existential Ethnography

[22] See: https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2006/09/19/reference/o-kyaku/#.WtJIhUxFw2w
[23] Please see the vignette "The Dance Teacher" for specifics.

Similar to auto-ethnography, existential ethnography calls the self into question, only on a larger scale that includes the selves of our interlocutors as well. Indeed, inquiries about the import and limitation of self are hallmarks of existential philosophy, along with the famed tenent that we're all just striving for self-realization: a sense that seems particularly urgent in times of crisis. Michael Jackson (the anthropologist, not the singer) explains existential ethnography in his book of the same name. His conception of existentialism sees the self not necessarily on her own, independently searching for authenticity, but instead as a response to her environment and relationships. In other words, the search for identity itself is a by-product of socio-cultural circumstance: a perspective that again shows how a critical study of self can shed light on social phenomena at large. He writes: "[H]owever being is symbolically expressed, the *question* of being is universal, and constitutes a starting-point in our attempt to explore human lifeworlds as sites of perennial struggle for existence—theorizing this as a dynamic relationship between the human capacity for life, and the potentialities of any social environment for providing the wherewithal of life."[24] An existential perspective sees the boundary between one and one another become blurry.

Speaking frankly, existentialism as expressed in its famed "crisis" was a defining element to my research on Japanese popular music, or J-pop. I had an *ibasho* – a place where one feels welcome and at home, among friends – in Akita, where three veteran dancers took me under their wings to carpool to rehearsals, eat soba, help me refine the dance steps, dress me up in *kimono* (and laugh at me—"haha, it looks funny on a big American!"), and ultimately to dance

[24] Michael Jackson, *Existential Ethnography: Events, Exigencies and Effects* (New York, Oxford: Bergahn Books, 2005), 35.

together for what is now three years and counting. The same is true for the underground music world, where societal outsiders like me – a foreigner, first and foremost -- are welcome, and where the music deeply resonated with me besides.

But J-pop?

After setting an actual alarm to hop online and secure a ticket as soon as sales began, I still couldn't nab a ticket to Kyary Pamyu Pamyu's *one* arena show that year. Following the massively popular girl group AKB48's media empire led me to dank corners in convenience stores where dejected-looking men in business suits sheepishly leafed through the group's newspaper and magazine. When I did finally see a screening of AKB48's weekly variety show, it was only because my assigned number was drawn from a hat, thereby gaining me entrance to the venue. I was the only woman amongst forty-nine other audience members, all of whom appeared to be businessmen – old enough to be the girls' fathers or even grandfathers – who screamed, shouted, and howled as the AKB48 girls pranced and danced, precociously slurped noodles, and said tongue twisters dangerously resembling sexual innuendos.

As we all sat in that theater together, I realized that we were, in actuality, totally alone. No one looked at one another, much less made conversation; the only thing we shared in common was AKB48, and even then, my interest in the group likely did not mirror those of the other audience members (unless there was another undercover anthropologist with a more covert disguise than my own). But all the same, there we were, in the same place at the same time. As I found myself growing increasingly depressed in Tokyo -- the Mad City -- with its manically happy façade dashed by a dark underbelly of suicide, homeless people in midnight

shanty-towns tidily packed up before the morning's first train, excessively cramped living conditions… suddenly, the average salaryman – the composite audience of AKB48 – no longer seemed so alien. In fact, we were all just souls trying to hack our way through the Concrete Jungle, grinning and bearing through our days while turning to fantasy for an escape. But whereas my escape was going to underground clubs and running off to Akita once a month, theirs involved 48 girls dressed in school uniforms cooing about how everything's going to be OK.

Potato potahto, right?

The existential crisis I experienced in Tokyo, then, was ultimately what led me to feel akin with the anonymous salaryman, while allowing me to conceptualize this rather abstract field site as viable.

Indeed, it was this same kind of existential crisis that led me to Japan's underground music scene in the first place, back when I was an English teacher on rural Awaji Island and before any of this was of scholarly concern to me. It was another instance of *en*: a happy non-accident or synchronicitous connection in which an acquaintance took me to a show where my life changed in an instant. The general alienation I felt from life in a fishing village where 70% of the residents are over 70 years old, and from coworkers who largely couldn't handle my presence, instantly dissipated amongst the soft, persistent pulse of underground electronic dance music. At last, a place where I could be myself— a feeling which grew in urgency when I lived in Tokyo. As I learned by attending everything from small parties to major gigs, practice sessions to recording sessions, secret raves in the mountains to parties where I even DJed

myself – this need for the freedom to self-express, I realized, is shared by fans and musicians alike. Indeed, it's what binds the scene together.

The only other major work on Japan's experimental underground music scene is *Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation,* by David Novak. His ethnography traces the circulation of records, tapes, and other material musical objects of Japan's noise music scene, arguing that noise's existence on the fringes of society—as in tucked-away record shops or in distorted performances in back-alley clubs – is what makes it underground. Novak writes, "[Noise's] aesthetic history is continually submerged in layered cycles of mediation, always reemerging changed, somewhere else," summed up in his theoretical concept of feedback: "circulation at the edge."[25] To Novak, Noise is an appropriation of media, of sensory overload, that "stress[es] the destructive power of machines over people."[26]

The key to understanding his conception of Noise, I argue, is found in his field experiences. As for his own time with underground Japan, he notes:

> [M]y interlocutors often did not direct me to other artists, or to prominent performance sites, jam sessions, gathering spots, or, indeed, to any obvious social marker of a locally emplaced music culture. Instead, I was directed to record shops as primarily public sources for information or aesthetic commentary. Performers insisted that if I *really* wanted to understand the boundaries of their Noise, I should visit a particular record store to put their stuff in the right context.[27]

But to me, the underground cannot be defined by its materiality alone: underground parties are spaces dedicated to rebelling against the constrictions of everyday life in a late capitalist societies like Japan, and the music is the soundtrack. Indeed, the music itself sonically rebels

[25] David Novak, *Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 19.
[26] Ibid, 179.
[27] Ibid, 162.

against the mainstream: either by appropriating its noise, or by encouraging people to dance... which is currently illegal in public spaces.

I do not argue here that my perspective is right, but rather that my experience in the field, and my understanding of the music, is *different*: after all, I *was* invited to parties. The reasons for this discrepancy are impossible to objectively decipher, but underscore my overall point about approaching the field with solipsism's relentless skepticism about reality. As shown by these two drastically different interpretations of the same obscure musical world, there is no definitive experience that a fieldworker *can* have, but only the experiences that we *do* have; the reality that unfolds is merely an illusion born of circumstance.

So although materiality has a place in defining music culture, I – like Miles Davis – have found that the broader social context – the conditions of everyday life, relationships, connections, chance events – impact the affect and meaning of the music. In Japan, I found this to be true of all the styles I studied – from traditional to popular to underground -- despite the divergences in their sound.

Bridging Fieldwork with Writing: Methodological Principles

True to my hypothesis on solipsistic ethnographic practice, in no way do I suppose that my project is generally representative of anything beyond my own experiences. At the same time, I was able to have these experiences because of the depth of my relationship with Japanese society at large, which was established outside of an academic context and reinforced through musical communities. Thus, throughout the duration of my ethnographic work, I have dually committed myself to having genuine, organic experiences with my interlocutors that

transcend mere research purposes, while representing these experiences as transparently as possible in my writing. In doing so, I ultimately aim to respond to the burgeoning discourse of so-called "activist ethnography," conceptualized as follows.

On Activist Ethnography

Generally, activist ethnography discusses topics relating to trifecta of race/class/gender, with the ethnographers discussing these hot-button issues in relation to colonialism, disaster, and trauma. Generally, it's supposed that brining attention to these issues gives voice to the subaltern communities affected by these problems. For instance, Maria Abe's research on Fukushima protest music brings important attention to the nuclear disasters, and the space that music has provided for resistance. In *Resonances of Chindon-ya: Sounding Space and Sociality in Contemporary Japan,* she writes:

> What we hear in chindon-ya's sonic presence in the anti-nuclear movement, then, is reclamation of labor from the capitalist logic to the production of sociality in its own right, not only among the living but also the social imaginary of the dead, however provisional and temporary it may be.[28]

However, I question here whether such work accurately captures what's happening in the field, let alone whether it produces tangible reverberations real-world impact.[29] My own years of experience in Japan shows that *chindon-ya*, the music Abe studies, does not have nearly as significant of a presence -- musically or socio-culturally --- as is portrayed in her book. From a methodological standpoint, I hypothesize that her research questions remained rigid

[28] Marie Abe, Resonances of Chindon-ya: Sounding Space and Sociality in Contemporary Japan (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2018), 211.
[29] To be fair, according to a conversation during her visit to Cornell in the fall of 2015, Ms. Abe mentioned how she volunteered in clean-up efforts following the disasters.

during her fieldwork, which have produced a tidy argument, but do not seem to accurately represent real-world experiences: ones that are often messy, always complicated, and often contradictory.

A beautiful exception to this trend is Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg's work *Righteous Dopefiend*, which explores the lifeworlds of heroin addicts in San Francisco, through scholarship and rich photo essays. As part of the University of California at Berkeley's Public Anthropology Series, their research is fundamentally intended to foster understanding—and compassion – for an aspect of everyday American life that often goes unnoticed, or is regarded with hostility. The work, written in a comparatively casual style, is accessible to a broad audience, and paints vivid portraits of their interlocutors—*Righteous Dopefiend* almost reads like a script, or a novel with a character-driven plot. Indeed, this is part of their overarching activist project, which they explain below:

> The central goal of this photo-ethnography of indigent poverty, social exclusion, and drug use is to clarify the relationships between large-scale power forces and intimate ways of being in order to explain why the United States, the wealthiest nation in the world, has emerged as a pressure cooker for producing destitute addicts embroiled in everyday violence… Our approach to scenes such as the one presented in the fieldnotes and the photographs that follow is premised on anthropology's tenet of cultural relativism, which strategically suspends moral judgement in order to understand and appreciate the diverse logics of social and cultural practices that, at first sight, often evoke righteous responses and prevent analytical self-reflection. Historically, cultural relativism has been anthropology's foundation for combating ethnocentrism. For us, it has also been a practical way to gain access to the difficult or shocking realities of drugs, sex, crime, and violence.[30]

[30] Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg. *Righteous Dopefiend* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The Regents of University of California Press, 2009). 5, 7.

By detailing these lifeworlds as-is without conceptualizing them within broader scholarly debates, Bourgois and Schonberg are able to bring attention to the issues at hand while honoring their interlocutors in the process.

This brings us to perhaps my central issue that I have with much so-called "activist ethnography," for which an honest reflection of one's work should be a prerequisite: how does writing about these albeit important issues with diction that most people cannot understand, and presenting these ideas in exclusive conferences or isolated graduate colloquia do anything concrete for the issues at hand? If the ethnographer's ultimate end-goal is to land prestige or job-stability in the academic world, is she not replicating the colonialist power dynamics she critiques in her writing?[31] I once asked a professor whose work claims activist stances what he thought about these issues, and I was told rather hotly that "simply adding to a body of literature" is an "inherent" act of activism. I respectfully disagree.[32] Even a shallow reflection about the audience of academic literature will inevitably reveal that the language makes this work accessible only to an elite group of highly educated individuals. What's more, many people in higher education come from economically privileged backgrounds where the injustices and hardships of capitalism are abstract points of debate, rather than pressing issues that cause tangible hardship. Even for those of us who saved every penny to get an education, or worked several jobs while in graduate school to make ends meet, it cannot be denied that it

[31] This might be especially true for ethnomusicologists, who are often doubly tasked with explaining how an obscure (non-Western) music is even relevant to the scholarly canon, particularly if it has already been written about. Unfortunately, this replicates colonialist power dynamics in scholarship almost to a literal degree: "This topic is *mine*! I got here first, no one else can touch it," or "Here's an obscure area of the world no one's written about… *mine*!"

[32] Benjamin Piekut, conversation, Cornell University, September 2015.

is a privilege to conceptualize – much less research -- such topics at all. This is the problem of the so-called Ivory Tower of academia: sure, the ideas are fine, and having a good debate can be intellectually stimulating, but if most people can't understand it, or if these ideas aren't circulated outside the confines of a university setting, then what's the point?

My approach to so-called "activist ethnography" thus seeks to walk the walk as much as I can, rather than merely talk the talk. This is true both for my work in the field, as well as the writing presented here. There are three pillars into which my action-based approach can be broken down, detailed in sections below: 1) Attitude (openness to an array of experiences in the field), 2) Inclusivity (both in terms of field experiences and the writing process), and 3) Accessibility (being transparent about my experiences, while writing for an audience transcendent of academia's privileged confines).

Attitude

The nature of my project has changed significantly throughout my tenure in graduate school, evolving from an inquiry about local roots and identity in *bon odori* – the music and dance of the Buddhist festival of the dead, *obon* – to identity and capitalism as expressed in popular and underground music in Japan, as well as *bon odori.* This reflects the openness with which I have approached my work, equipping myself with nothing but a solid hypothesis and the awareness that nothing is truly objective. Throughout my fieldwork and in the writing process, I've tried to let the experiences and ideas naturally emerge from the material, rather than prove a rigid theory. In order to do so, I remained (and remain) sensitive to how to best approach a situation so as to let it unfold as beautifully as possible; in the field, I learned that

this is highly contingent upon forming meaningful relationships with people that transcend the alienating researcher/subject dynamic into something more nuanced, and genuine.

Indeed, finding a term that can describe these complex relationships has proven to be a challenge, as "informant" is clinical and distant whereas mere "friend" does not wholly capture the almost student-pupil dynamics that developed with the musicians and dancers who have contributed to this project over the years. Although these roles have since been retired in some circles (particularly in the underground), perhaps the best way to describe these relationships lay outside the discourse of theoretical anthropology: throughout the course of my fieldwork, I was continually blessed with and astounded by *en*. Certain coincidences lined up beyond my wildest expectations that allowed this project to unfold the way that it did. As detailed in the chapter on underground music, for instance, I found the same tiny music scene in the staggering metropolis of Tokyo through two completely different entry points, ultimately showing that, in many ways, that scene (and this project) found *me* more than I found *it.*

I also suppose that "interlocutor" is an apt term to describe these relationships.

Yet although things lined up for me beyond anything I could have planned myself, I made sure to be genuine and transparent interactions, letting them unfold naturally; in retrospect, I realize how easily they could have been spoiled had I not taken this approach. The "secret mountain party" that DJ Edamame invited me to, for instance, was prefaced with the question: "Are you OK with drugs?" I hesitated, but ultimately answered with my truth: "Um… yeah, sure, whatever." This party ended up changing the course of my professional and personal life forever, yet had I approached meeting with Edamame – itself a result of simply

going to a party, meeting him, and getting invited to a smaller, private party – with a tape recorder and disclosure forms, our meeting certainly would have had a different outcome.

I probably wouldn't have been invited in the first place.

In *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture*, Aaron Fox comes up against similar methodological dilemmas: doing what we ethnographers are taught we *should* do, versus doing what feels right in the moment for the sake of our relationships. In the end, the latter approach proved more theoretically (and, of course, personally) fruitful for Fox, as he recalls:

> As my truck grumbled to a stop, I grabbed my tape recorder from the seat beside me, but changed my mind and set it down. I didn't know the other two men I saw working with Hoppy today, and I had developed a sense of the boundaries between my presence and my project that told me now was not the time to push my research agenda. I taped less and less as time went on, and as my relationships deepened and became more personal and complicated. But I remembered more.[33]

Here, Fox brings attention to how complex the relationships between the researcher and her interlocutors can become. This might be especially true with projects on music, an art form that requires genuine interaction and vulnerability to do successfully. Even finding such a bar in a place like Lockhart, Texas – let alone developing trusting relationships and friendships with the regulars – leans on a skill set that cannot be taught in an academic setting. Indeed, I dare venture to say that learning when to let something go and approach it with feeling, rather than logic, are skills that run counter to what we're taught in graduate school. I similarly found that a tape recorder (or a smart phone) would have been wholly inappropriate for many of my so-

[33] Aaron Fox. *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 5.

called interviews with musicians, particularly in the underground but also in the traditional music world. For one, many of the conversations that informed my understanding of how these scenes were formed happened spontaneously: I recall one particular night I made an appearance at DJ Edamame's weekly party, which ended up becoming an all-night hang-out session with him and members from the industrial/avant-garde group FANG. During this spontaneous social interaction, we had conversations that confirmed certain suspicions I had about aspects of the scene. Because we were just hanging out – humans to humans -- I couldn't very well go back the next day with a smartphone and say, "Hey Edamame, can you tell me that thing you said about capitalism one more time?"[34]

Inclusivity, Discursive and Otherwise

How does one transcribe or cite these "interviews," then? I consider interview technique to actually be an issue of inclusivity. On the surface, as Fox points out, the "objective" and "ethical" thing to do is record the conversations to make sure that the conversation is accurately represented. Yet as I was doing my fieldwork and upon putting together the dissertation, it seemed that putting these conversations into *my own* words would actually serve as a more objective representation of what happened, not least because transcribing the conversation word for word seems clinical and distant—and almost exoticist in

[34] I will point out that I was asked to do this for one of the (at least) two times I've been featured on Japanese television. To preface, Japanese talk shows often feature a written caption of funny, clever, or otherwise mood-encompassing remarks underneath the speaker's image; after being stopped in the streets of Tokyo's ritzy Ginza neighborhood to be interviewed about my fashion, I was asked to retell what was perceived as *the* soundbyte of the interview, presumably so that it could be made into one of these captions: "I can't buy shoes in Japan because my feet are too big." When I tried to explain that this was embarrassing for me, the producers laughed and assured me that it's funny, and I reluctantly gave in, just giving them what they wanted so that they would leave me alone. Sigh, Japan: where laughing at people for being different is still totally acceptable.

scope. Therefore, I argue that an inclusive approach puts these conversations into the broader context of the story of this ethnographic project. This is in the spirit of what Fox calls the "full indirect discourse" that defines everyday speech in working-class Texas (and in Japan, as it turns out). When working on the linguistic portion of his project on country music, Fox noticed full indirect discourse as "a way of representing (or 'quoting') the meaning or gist of another's utterance without claiming to represent the actual words s/he originally spoke." An example of this might be "She was like, 'I've had too much coffee today!' but then she went to get some more in the afternoon…" Throughout this dissertation, I take a full indirect discursive approach to representing these conversations, the feeling of the parties, the atmosphere of the events, and the way things unfolded. This also takes into account the very important fact that many of my interlocutors would have balked at being recorded in the first place (which I intuited from the beginning). One DJ interlocutor even pointed out, "If you had a tape recorder, I wouldn't be telling you any of this."[35]

Indeed, throughout the course of writing this dissertation I have struggled with the dual of problems of citations and the canon of discourse that shapes the fields within which this dissertation operates (ethnomusicology, anthropology, critical theory, and Asian studies). A part of me bristles at the prospect of citing theories that are either so well-known as to be incorporated into everyday academic vernacular (Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*: *Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books, 1973) or are such obvious claims that I hesitate to give

[35] Nishisaka Masayuki, interviewed by Jillian Marshall, Osaka, Japan, April 2015, Osaka, Japan. Important to note is that I have run by every major event related to this dissertation project (presentations, conference papers, the actual writing itself) to my primary interlocutors, either through email, social media, text message, or face-to-face interactions.

an author formal credit (Christopher Smalls, *Musicking: The Meaning and Performance of Listening*. Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1998). On the other hand, I have crafted this introduction to serve as a literature review at the same time that it prompts readers on my research; in doing so, I have hoped to account for the multi-disciplinarily of my project, and the ways that each field approaches my research questions. The writing I present here, then, performative, which Norman K. Denzin defines as

> …an act of intervention, a method of resistance, a form of criticism, a way of revealing agency. Performance becomes public pedagogy when it uses the aesthetic, the performative, to foreground the intersection of politics, institutional sites, and embodied experience. In this way performance is a form of agency, a way of bringing culture and the person into play.[36]

So, rather than have discussions about topics, I aim to actively demonstrate my stance on them with purposeful inclusions (or omissions). A conventional literature review, where I would summarize the ideas of Bourdieu (the habitus), Baudrillard, (the simulacrum), Derrida (diff*é*rance) would replicate the normative politics of a white, privileged canon of critical theory that I ultimately aim to challenge.

I should note that I have purposefully elected not to include a separate section for issues of race/class/gender in my dissertation. I do not believe that these are discrete issues that can be easily factored into a study as a neat, tidy chapter; indeed, I believe that doing so only replicates their Other-ness. Commenting specifically on the "issue" of gender, my feminist stance is not qualified by quoting relevant literature on the topic, though I have found anthropologist Ruth Behar's words that "when women write, the world watches" to be

[36] Norman K. Denzin, *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 9.

particularly relatable in terms of the pressures we face when presenting our work.[37] After all, women are often subconsciously evaluated to a different standard then men, even for producing the same caliber of work. In *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead,* Sheryl Sandberg explains:

> Men and women differ when it comes to explaining failure. When a man fails, he points to factors like "didn't study enough" or "not interested in the subject matter." When a woman fails, she is more likely to believe it is due to an inherent lack of ability. And in situations where a man and a woman each receive negative feedback, the woman's self-confidence and self-esteem drop to a much greater degree. The internalization of failure and the insecurity it breeds hurt future performance, so this pattern has serious long-term consequences.[38]

Because this internalization extends to assessment as well, I advise readers to take it upon themselves to make sure that their reading is as (here's that word again) objective as possible.[39] This way, I can save energy to talk about my hard-earned content rather than reinventing the wheel with a chapter that feebly attempts to justify why women should be treated seriously as scholarly equals in the first place. After all, the burden for women to handle these issues is part of the problem; in *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir eloquently writes that "[women's] wings are clipped, and then she's blamed for not knowing how to fly."[40] So, why is it *my* responsibility to check *your* male gaze with an extra chapter's worth of work on something you can – and should -- school yourself on?

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[37] Ruth Behar, "Introduction," in *Writing Writing Culture*, ed. Ruth Behar and Deborah Gordon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 32.
[38] Sheryl Sandberg. *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 3,
[39] Men are evaluated according to potential, whereas women tend to be evaluated based on past performance. For instance, a paper written by a male author might be considered to have some room for improvement, but generally innovative ideas that can be groomed with proper mentoring; if the author is female, the same paper is likely considered to have some good ideas, but exhibits some holes, which could indicate fundamental errors in judgement. Sandberg argues that this phenomenon shows why so few executives agree to mentor women, ultimately explaining why so few women hold positions of power.
[40] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 250.

In this same spirit, I have similarly sought out subaltern voices to diversify my bibliography; this is the overarching reason why I have opened my dissertation with words from Miles Davis, provocative and problematic though they might be. Speaking of African American jazz trumpet players, I strive to be sensitive to the fact that including token subaltern voices only reinforces their outsiderness, as Cornell A. D. White Professor at Large Wynton Marsalis said during his guest lecture in MUSIC 3111:

> I understand why women aren't interested in jazz today. If I walk in a club and see nothin' but men in there liftin' weights on their instruments with fast and high licks, man, I think those women are smart not to be in there. That's not even music. Unless we in a locker room and we playin' ball, I don't wanna see a group full of all men and no women. And it's a big problem, because we are living in a culture of misogyny and pornography. Say what you want, but that's what it is. If you had told me back in the 70's that everyone would have these videos and all that? Man… I don't know. Men, you know, we used to have to look good to play. That's part of what the women wanted, and what the dancing was all about. There's a sexuality to playing that's an important part of what we do as musicians. And now they pay them rappers to look ugly and call women bitches? Back in my day, if you called a woman a bitch, you'd get slapped—rightly so. And I'll get asked, do you have any gay players in your band? Man, maybe, I dunno. Isn't that personal?[41]

[41] Wynton Marsalis, guest lecture, Cornell University, March 27, 2018.

At the same time, I strive to remain as open as possible to inevitable errors in my judgement about these issues. While intersectionality pivot points of gender (being a woman) and class (growing up socio-economically disadvantaged) have allowed me to understand some of the shared struggles between subaltern groups – and while living in Japan has afforded me insight into life as an immigrant, and how it feels to be racially profiled – I will never understand what it's like to be black in America, say. I will never understand the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Therefore, it is important for me to clearly state in this document that any errors in judgement are honest mistakes that I would like pointed out so that they may be rectified; my dissertation is not intended as a performance of my political correctness.

After all, the feeling of being taken seriously simply to assuage someone else's moral conscience is a feeling many subalterns know too well. For instance, a recent academic job search revealed that "being a woman" was an important criterion for selection. Personally, if I found out that my credentials were only considered to meet some kind of diversity requirement to make a department look better, I would withdraw my application. And when I expressed my distaste for the situation upon being asked for my opinion, I was told to reconsider my feelings. #metoo

I considered writing a special section on female DJs, since they are such a rarity in Japan. But throughout my fieldwork, it seemed that whenever asking these women if they felt any particular pressures or anxieties about being in such a male-dominated lifeworld, I was given answers that ran contrary to what I was fishing for: "Not really," or "I don't really think about it" were two of the most common responses. Whether or not this is "true" is beside the point (although I suspect it is, based on observations of body language and other non-verbal cues), so

to remain allegiant to my interlocutors' responses, no such section is included in this dissertation – for any chapter. After all, wouldn't having a separate space dedicated for a discussion of gender in the first place only reinforce difference?

Accessibility (OR: Parallel Universes: The Power of the Ethnographic Vignette OR: Real Talk with Dr. X)

Throughout the process of writing this dissertation, I – like others before me – have stumbled on writing blocks that have, at times, reached daunting proportions. One of the most reliable methods I've used to bust through these has been to actually write *more*, but in a context where I allow myself to use my own voice. Many of these writings turned into the vignettes presented in this dissertation, which in turn gave me the confidence to return to the more formal style of academic writing. After all, if (some of) the biggest challenges with academic writing are clarity, relatability, and communication, then putting ideas into one's own words first creates a transparency that ultimately allows the writer to command her ideas as well as syntactic choices.

You can't *really* lie to yourself, you know?[42]

So, as I continually hit blocks while working on the theoretical chapters and produced vignettes to keep the momentum going, I found that I was actually striving to communicate the same "thing" in both sets of writing: the same feeling, the same sense, the same experience, the same observations, the same intuition, the same overall point. With well over a hundred pages of vignettes that outlined the companion data set to the conclusions I was writing about

[42] Well, you can, but this is called "denial" and causes all sorts of problems.

in more academic chapters, I realized that I effectively, if accidently, produced two dissertations: one explicitly dedicated to outlining my logic (the chapters), and one explicitly dedicated to capturing my experience (the vignettes). Much like my methodological approach to fieldwork, I ended up letting my writing develop naturally as a kind of experiment toward a more total objectivity. In the spirit of meta-experimentation, then, I leave some of these vignettes purposefully unincorporated into the academic bulk to leave you, the reader, the freedom to answer: do the vignettes communicate anything different from the theoretical writing?

Naturally, the realization that I'd accidently written two mirror dissertations – along with a proclivity to procrastinate that I dare say most of us who've ever written a dissertation have experienced – led me to fantasize about alternate titles. *Real Talk with Dr. X* came to mind somewhere along the way, and I increasingly found it fitting to capture not only what I hope to contribute to the body of scholarship on (Japanese) music, but aptly reflective of the activist stance I have tried to take with my writing—as well reflective of my dedication to maintaining true to one's voice in the writing process.

This starts first with the letter "X," which connotes ambiguity and, to a degree, anonymity. Like many women, I've worried about whether the reception of my work has been influenced by the politics of my gender: a discourse in which, as mentioned, I have limited interest to begin with. "X" removes my gender from the equation (pun intended) entirely, while its pairing with the male-coded "Doctor" creates a certain punchiness that might catch readers off-guard if my third-dimensional identity is revealed. Indeed, even "Doctor" might be seen as an unexpected (soon-to-be) title for someone like me, who might not fit the stereotype of this

title. After all, I've learned the hard way, and through uncomfortably honest advice for which I am thankful, that smiley blonde women have to develop a thick skin to make it in the academic world, or change their personalities entirely.[43] #metoo

Oh, and that, as a "young woman in the academy," I should "be aware of the way that I dress." #metoo

Indeed, it's exactly this tension between hard and soft, feminine and masculine, that intrigues me, as it plays into the second aspect of the letter "X" that I found fitting for what, upon retrospect, unfolded as my generally unconventional, but successful approach not only to fieldwork but to scholarship as well: the "X-factor", that certain something that can't ever be fully predicted in terms of material outcome, but can be counted on to spice things up—for better or worse. For instance, the same ideas for which I received nearly failing marks with no constructive feedback in a seminar on ethnographic methodologies earned me a Fulbright scholarship awarded to only five scholars across the nation… to conduct my fieldwork. #metoo

Of course, I take on the moniker of this alter-ego with awareness of the letter X's cultural connotations. No, I'm not talking about the iPhone X (although those working at Apple should heed what I'm saying, given the socio-cultural weight of this letter). Rather, Malcolm X comes to mind: a man who shed his birth name, too entangled in America's bleak, ongoing legacy of slavery and (institutionalized) racism, for a letter with anonymity—with no history. In addition to the brutally honest observations and critiques of race relations in America –

[43] Something I am unwilling to compromise on. Rather than morph who I am to be better received by male (and female) colleagues, I invite those troubled by my deeply offensive trait of friendliness to reassess their own stance. All the same, I acquiesce that these comments have brought me face-to-face with people-pleasing tendencies that have ironically hindered my authentic self-expression. Truly, every cloud has a silver lining!

particularly urgent in the era of #BlackLivesMatter -- *The Autobiography of Malcom X*, written by Alex Haley, serves as a tome of ethnographic "insiderness" that is deeply inspiring. That he was able to gain Malcolm X's trust to complete this project is, itself, a triumph. Haley writes: "'I don't *completely* trust anyone,' [Malcom X] went on, 'not even myself. I have seen too many men destroy themselves…' Malcolm X looked squarely at me. 'You I trust about twenty-five percent.'"[44]

Although the scale of my project in no way matches the import of *The Autobiography of Malcom X*, I similarly based my project on gaining the trust of my interlocutors; after all, without them this project wouldn't exist. Moreover, Haley -- like Quincey Troupe and his account of Miles Davis' life story -- is able to meticulously capture Malcom X's voice, while standing aside to let this man's powerful life story speak for itself. Again, this underscores my point about activist ethnography: rather than merely talking about the idea of these issues, I seek to address the unsavory politics of the canonical literature to include subaltern voices in contexts beyond their oppression.

Important to note is that I have no misgivings about the impact of my work: this is but a small contribution to a problem that requires a lifetime of commitment to humility, and I am no (white) savior. But I do aim to illustrate the impact of including subaltern voices without replicating the history of their oppression – indeed, in the very spirit of Malcom X's name change. For instance, when searching for a particular citation from Marx in my definition of late capitalist life, I happened to be reading a lesser-known essay by Oscar Wilde about the socio-

[44] Malcom X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 17.

economic inequality caused by the mechanization of labor and the advent of the "work day." I therefore chose Wilde to intellectually supplement this section not because he represents an LBGTQ voice and therefore ticks a diversity box, but because his ideas were interesting and thoughtful, and got at what I am trying to say—and besides, we already know that Marx had a lot to say about capitalism.[45]

Similarly, here we are having a discussion about Malcom X in a dissertation about music in contemporary Japan.

If we're being honest, another strong association of the letter X -- at least for me -- comes from the website www.maddox.xmission.com, which I frequented as a high schooler (back when it was still www.thebestpageintheuniverse.net). At times dated, embarrassingly juvenile, and simply offensive, I nonetheless appreciate Maddox's "X Mission," in which popular discussion points are thoughtfully debated with an exaggerated, scathing voice that somehow manages to get to the heart of an issue, without actually revealing his *real* stance. With pithy essay titles like "Nobody Cares if Your Puns were Intended" and opening his work with such introductory gems as "Everybody is an idiot except for me," he blows any notion of objectivity out of the water, and immediately brings the reader up to his (warp) speed. While I don't necessarily take as polemic – nay, pugnacious and deliberately provoking – stance as Maddox, I appreciate that he has fully cultivated his voice, takes risks for the sake of his comedy, tackles interesting issues with a surprising degree of thoughtfulness, and isn't afraid to be unpopularly received.[46]

[45] This also represents my dedication to inclusivity.
[46] His website even features a page for hate mail sent by angry readers.

Lastly, I include this section simply as an act of quasi-rebellion. In February of 2018, in the midst of an animated discussion about my chapter on traditional music and dance, I waxed to Professor Aaron Fox of Columbia University that I secretly dream of calling my dissertation *Real Talk with Dr. X.* In response, the normally kinetic energy of this brilliant man halted, and he cocked his head with a confused grin:

"… *Real Talk with Dr. X*?"

Soundtracks: Chapter Layout

I have written a chapter for each of the three music scenes I have investigated, and they themselves are grouped into two sections: Aesthetics of Capitalism, and Aesthetics of Resistance. The chapters are written in a meta-narrative style reflective of the music of each scene, as well as the discourse typically used to discuss them. In a way, the writing in each chapter might be considered liner notes for the soundtrack they describe: appropriate to the audience of each music, both as musicologists and as listeners. They are also designed to be performative, which Denzin describes as a mode of inquiry utilized by "the fusion of critical pedagogy and performative praxis," and as "a method of doing evaluation ethnography, as a path to understanding, as a tool for engaging collaboratively the meanings of experience, as a means to mobilize persons to take action in the world."[47]

The first chapter, on Japanese popular music, engages in a theoretical discussion somewhat alienated from music (other than its consumption), much like the broader discussions of capitalism, popular culture, the culture industry, and nationalism with which I

[47] Denzin, *Performance Ethnography*, 19.

engage. The clinical, cynical perspective adopted in this chapter also reflects what it felt like trying to penetrate the J-pop scene. After all, I had wrongly assumed that this would be the easiest musical lifeworld to access from the onset of the project, because of its ubiquity and availability. The analysis presented in this chapter thus reflects these experiences with a distant, probing curiosity about for what, exactly, this music serves as a soundtrack: consumer demand, or the creation of the popular? Here, I provide an analytical foundation for the overall structure of my dissertation, which sees aesthetics of capitalism and resistance as a Gestalt. Chapter One explains the capitalist aesthetic: globally uniform marketization, profitization of the postmodern condition, and the entanglement of state and corporate interest in so-called popular culture.

The second chapter, which focuses on traditional music, takes the Nishimonai *Bon Odori* as my primary case study for exploring traditional music's place in contemporary Japanese society. It is the most "traditional" ethnography conducted in this project: I found an ancient music culture, learned how to perform by taking lessons and learning from *sempai* mentors, and conducted interviews with participants and organizers. As such, the writing style is also traditionally ethnomusicological: I consider the history, origins, organology, and structure of the music and dance, while discussing the politics of its contemporary performance practice and championing for continued relevance in the twenty-first century. Through an auto-ethnographic perspective, Chapter Two casts traditional music as an aesthetic of resistance.

The last chapter, on underground music, is written in the most experimental, performative style of the three—much like the underground itself. It is narrative and informal, yet traverses new territory in ethnographic writing that seeks to demonstrate new theoretical

possibilities for integrating the vignette in scholarly writing. I write in this style with the intent of resisting norms in ethnographic writing (as discussed) in the same spirit that underground music culture challenges mainstream socio-cultural norms: that is, personally and explicitly. Chapter Three explores the principles, networks, and location of the (Japanese) underground, while encouraging readers to understand music – underground and otherwise—not as a style per se, but an expression of socio-cultural values and desires.

The conclusion of this dissertation is short, but sweet, conceptualizing the project in its original ethnographic context. I was told by a professor in the obscure field of Japanese underground music, at the 2015 Society of Ethnomusicology annual conference, that comparing these three musical scenes would ultimately prove to be fruitless. "How do you think this comparison can contribute to the body of literature?" he asked curtly, not particularly interested in my response. Gathering my thoughts, I calmly replied that I didn't necessarily conceptualize my project this way, but rather that this just is, frankly, the way that is: after all, all three musics are performed in contemporary Japan, and therefore have "contemporary Japan" in common. Although this marked the end of our friendly exchange of ideas – shortly after he brusquely got up from the table and left, while hissing through his teeth that it was "nice meeting me" – I stand by my project. #metoo And not just in terms of its structure—as I explain, conceptualizing these musics as aesthetics of capitalism and resistance was a natural conclusion of my time in the field.

And so, without further ado…

Hajimemashouka?[48]

[48] Shall we begin?

Hate/Love

For Charlie Friedberg

1. *Hate*

Alright, alright. I know that what I'm about to do is probably considered offensive, or ignorant, or whatever. Say what you want, but I've got so much experience in Japan – and in so many capacities – that I'm warranted to my feelings, OK? Seriously, go ahead—judge me for my cultural ineptitude, lack of flexibility, or inability to understand the nuances of this "beautiful" and "ancient" culture. Look, we all know at this point that I fell hopelessly in love with Japan, and at first sight, too – but I'm here to say that I often wish this weren't the case. After all, you can't choose who or what you love, but I'm remembering now that you *can* choose what to do with those feelings. The truth is that I've had a love-hate relationship with Japan since the beginning, when I was treated either like an alien queen or like pond scum, or a helpless puppy dog, or a doll—but rarely as anything in between (like, say, a human). So, after diligently working hard to "bridge cultural gaps" and "see the bright side" for the past nine years, I'm doing something different for the next while:

I'm taking a break from Japan.

Why? Japan is extremely frustrating. Everything is *perfect*—the transportation, the food, the efficiency, people's clothes, the cars, the streets, the gift shops, the parks, the traditions… there's no denying that. But it's also TOTALLY FAKE and it drives me nuts. You have people leaping to their deaths in front of the trains every day in Tokyo as the stations play the most annoyingly "happy happy" jingles *ever* over the intercom. People drink themselves to death

because everyone's an alcoholic. Like, they drink openly by themselves, at 10 o'clock in the morning, on the train… it doesn't matter. Wherever and whenever there's an excuse to drink, people do it and take it to the extreme. Seriously, for whatever "order" and "respect" that these people have, they blow it all up by getting shit-faced wasted at bars every night for "work" or just to "relax", and puke on the stairs before passing out in their own vomit. If they're still semi-conscious they may go over and buy women at soap lands, Philippine Bars, and surely other such places that you can look up if you want to learn about straight-up seediness. What's more, it seems that most people are not capable of or interested in relationships based on honest communication and commitment, and are instead endlessly fascinated by the prospect of self-sabotaging, masochistic, elicit affairs with absurdly inappropriate people. Because in Japan, once something becomes a "responsibility" – and trust me, most Japanese people secretly HATE responsibility, despite the image we Americans have of them – then they compulsively start to resent it, dread it, and not-so-secretly try to avoid it… even if they used to love it more than anything else.

But don't get divorced if there are children involved! That would set a bad example.

With your friends, too, you never know when someone might just jump off the face of the planet. Japan invented "ghosting" long before people lived on their devices, so disappearing on a friend takes on new levels of insanity in Japanese society. I mean, you might get ghosted after *someone else* initiates contact – sometimes multiple times – or even arranges the plans. Let's not forget the classic, "*Kaze wo hiita,* I have a cold, sorry," which in Japanese means "I think you're a fucking creep, and don't send me any more messages because I want absolutely nothing to do with you." *Kaze wo hiita* is literally the lamest excuse in the book—it might even

be worse than being ghosted, because not saying anything at all at least acknowledges that you can pick up on more subtle cues; outright rejecting someone with an excuse everyone knows is a lie is extremely direct by Japanese standards, which means that the person must think you're a full-on psychopath out to stalk them.

"Oh, but they were just being nice and didn't want to hurt your feelings." *Nice*? If someone doesn't like somebody else, why even bother to make plans? Like, I didn't even contact you -- *you* messaged *me.* And now you cancelled because "Japanese people are shy?" Oh, come on. What does "shy" even mean to you people? To me, disappearing off the radar entirely when trust is about to get established is a pretty brazen display of a complete disregard of someone else's feelings. That, or a pretty creative way of getting someone to feel shitty about a lunch date they probably didn't even want to go on in the first place. It's straight-up gaslighting—sheer crazy-making.

Yeah, that's harsh. And I don't even totally believe it, but it feels good to say.

But for real, I really am sick of Japan saying that it's so polite all the time. People openly gawking at me telling me about how "big" I am five thousand times is… it's just next-level. It's just *so profoundly rude*. And the worst part is, if I say something about it[49], it's then turned back onto me. "Oh, you took it the wrong way!" Then, suddenly, I've just played into some

[49] In the fall of 2017, when I worked at a bar in Osaka, a confrontation (by Japanese standards—which literally wouldn't register on the American social spectrum) with a customer came up when this tall doctor claimed that I didn't know my own height. "I'm 186 centimeters, and I'm shorter than you! You *can't* just be 184 centimeters tall." *Um… I know my own height, hoss, and I specifically looked it up AND double checked a) because we don't use this measuring system in my home society and b) because I get asked this all the time in this country, constantly, every day, sometimes multiple times. I may not look like it, and in your society it may be OK to "mansplain," but I am getting a PhD, so go check your sources. Shit. Maybe you need to recheck* your *height.*

stereotype about Americans *sigh* simply never being able to understand the "subtleties of Japanese culture." But like, let's get real here. There's nothing subtle about straight-up MAKING FUN OF SOMEONE for being different, and in a society where being part of a group means so much. How would you people like it if I said, "I think you're all a bunch of cowards who never get anything done because you don't know how to communicate?" Or, "I think you're all a bunch of phonies who think you're better than everyone else?"

Maybe this is all some sort of post-colonial karma, like a grand cosmic play. OK, OK, there were definitely some irreconcilable differences about the way the Pacific War went down. Now let's get this straight: I think the dropping of the atomic bombs is one of the lowest points in all of human history… an act whose consequences were all but thought out. But at this point there's no going back in time… can we even the playing field now? It's been a while-- the jig is up. And in the grand scheme of things, I think you guys made out *pretty* well in the post-war—besides, it's not like Japan wasn't also some evil empire, sadistically destroying the lives and dignity of millions… and without ever formally apologizing to the former colonies in Asia…

Plus, America has also been completely colonized by the same forces that caused the Japanese empire to collapse. It's not like we're sitting pretty over here while you guys scrounge for food. Now, I don't mean to discount the wartime years and the tragedies that Japan suffered at the hands of America… that shit was real, and extended to the treatment of Japanese people living in the United States as well (internment camps, anyone?). But… it's 2018, yo. And again, I understand that there are terrible problems now that all stem from America's "victory" in 1945, like the suicide rate in Japan. It's capitalism, the crazy-long work days, and the fact that everyone's living in postmodern misery. But it's the same shit over here,

too, just differently expressed. We also have suicides, often following horrific and nearly performative mass shootings at schools, churches, malls, movie theaters, concerts… and we have race riots, food desserts, big pharma, an insane president who is trying to build a WALL on the Mexican border, a completely corrupt government and media industry, big oil, angry and uneducated masses with guns looking for a scapegoat, disintegrating public schools, staggering income inequality of fantastic proportions (the Koch Brothers are like supervillains out of a comic book), bucolic splendor rotting from the inside out with meth and heroin epidemics, ineffective public transportation, machine guns and sniper rifles available for purchase at large, FEWER vacation days in the average 9-5 than even Japanese workers have…[50]

This is the jungle, y'all. This is some *real* shit, too. #prayforamerica #onlythestrongsurvive

Like Fukushima. That was such a telling moment to be in Japan. My coworkers apparently couldn't have cared less about what I was going through, 10,000 miles away from ALL OF MY FAMILY AND FRIENDS. Even if they did "in their hearts" but "didn't want to make me feel embarrassed by directly acknowledging my feelings," *not a single person I worked with* reached out to me to ask if I was OK. Instead, they actually MADE FUN OF ME in an attempt to "lighten the atmosphere" in the staffroom. Asking me if I knew there had been an earthquake and tsunami in a joking, pedantic tone—and in front of everyone? I mean, are you *fucking* serious? Not that you need to go to college to know about an earthquake, but to knowingly

[50] An interesting statistic indeed. So-called "lazy" Americans, on average, only receive ten vacation days a year—one of the fewest number of days allotted in the world. In Japan, that number hovers at around twenty-one days a year. To be fair, most Japanese don't take advantage of these days, but that's a problem with their own society… they COULD take the time off, but a sense of "duty to the boss" keeps them locked in the office, even if most people spend these "arduous" working hours online shopping or texting.

attack my intelligence in a moment of weakness is just such a low blow. Besides, I was probably the most educated person in that room, not least because I actually learned stuff in college – and a good one at that – rather than drowning myself in Asahi Superdry and skipping class for four years like most Japanese people do. To take away someone's dignity like that, and in such a vulnerable position – 22 years old, a foreigner far from home as nuclear plans exploded by the minute and aftershocks rippled throughout the country, including where we were located -- bestowed a harsh, unsavory, but important lesson*: most Japanese people fundamentally do not consider non-Japanese to be human*— that is, to have feelings, to be sensitive, to have intelligence or dignity, and to be worthy of basic respect. So every time some Japanese person asks if I'm astounded by how polite Japan is, tee-hee, because Americans are just so… forthright, tee-hee, I have bitten my tongue.

Not anymore, man. I'm DONE. You people are delusional.

Looking back, I held my shit together during Fukushima like a CHAMP. In a similar situation, a Japanese person would have probably had a mental breakdown and fled the country immediately. But me? Despite getting inundated with hysterical messages from well-meaning-but-stress-inducing friends and family every day demanding that I "come home," I never seriously considered leaving because I cared about my students—and my greater responsibilities as an educator that I, for one, actually took (and take) seriously. And let's not forget that I was barely even in a position of authority as the lowly "Assistant Language Teacher" (ALT), who was treated by the majority of my coworkers like a Clown—an English speaking monkey...

"Class, repeat after me!"

Yet despite these hardships, the fuzzy feelings had me glossing over the issues between Japan and me; I was looking at things through rose-colored glasses. By the end of my initial two-year tenure in Japan, I felt that this country and I had forged a beautiful relationship. Sure, there were some rough times, but some of the happiest times of my life were there… hidden beaches, abandoned buildings, climbing on tsunami breakers, long bike rides deep in Osaka, rolling in the snow, staying out all night dancing, bullet trains (or local trains) to the mountains or the sea or temples or ancient villages… but now, I am finally allowing myself to feel the injustices that have built up over the years. I've hit a breaking point. Something is telling me to take some distance from Japan … to find out if the love was real. My research project is done, my student days are at an end... is this not a perfect chance for a fresh start?

From here on out, if Japan wants to be in my life, it's going to have to show *me* some love. I'm letting go, 100%.

'Cuz, you know, when is *Japan* going to finally get hip to the fact that I tried really, really hard to find happiness there? To see the bright side, to bring people together—even *Japanese* people who wouldn't have anything to do with each other if it weren't for me, like a 72-year old piano teacher and unemployed DJs playing on synthesizers all day feeling sorry for themselves? But more than all this, it's just time for Japan to acknowledge that other cultures have their own different, BUT VALID way of doing things. A good way to start would be to notice that every culture – not just Japan's -- is "unique." That's a bullshit word, too—"unique." By its very definition – resembling nothing else – *EVERYTHING* IS UNIQUE. Now I don't identify as a flag

toting, gun slinging, burger eating, cowboy boot stompin' 'Murkin, but I'm proud to be from a place that at least acknowledges cultural differences—even if, as a society, we suck at it. The US is kind of the global whipping boy for race relations anyway because we're probably the most mediated society in the world, and we have a lot of violence here. It's true, it's shitty, and honestly, things are definitely as bad or maybe even worse than how they look on-screen. But we're also a country that AT LEAST TRIES to be inclusive.

Japan, on the other hand? HA! One of their immigration policies, which requires all foreigners to change their name to a Japanese name upon adopting the Japanese nationality, is eerily similar to the war-time assimilation policy enacted in colonial Korea and Taiwan – wherein all "subjects of the Great Japanese emperor" were forced to change their names to Japanese names with no relationship whatsoever to their own.[51] Very rarely have people acknowledged that, no, I'm not a just a selfish idiot [American] who doesn't know anything, I just come from a place that's NOT JAPAN.

My GOD, do you have any idea how much lighter it feels to let this shit go?

Over the years, I have given so much to Japan, asked so many questions, humbled myself time and time again to learn about pretty much anything Japanese: the geography (I know all 48 prefectures and their capital cities, and have travelled to the majority of them—even weird ones like Gunma and all of Tohoku), the food (I had to learn how to make some things just to survive when I first moved there at age 21), the music (traditional, popular, AND

[51] Korean, Chinese, and Japanese all share a writing system based on Chinese characters (*han zi* in Manadrin, *hanja* in Korean, *kanji* in Japanese). By the way, Japan's wartime assimilation policies was the subject of my honors thesis at the University of Chicago, entitled: *In Search of Place: Colonial Korean and Taiwanese Identity Formation during Kominka's National Language Movement and Military Volunteer Programs, 1937-1945.*

underground), the language (both in classrooms and in an immersion setting—and taking Japanese as a class was a traumatic experience every time, so it gives me great pleasure to know that I never have to go through it again[52]), the culture (religion, art, social relations, holidays and traditions), and the people (teachers, business people, free-lancers, middle schoolers, young children, old ladies, old men, hostesses, DJs, professional dancers, drunks, addicts, junkies, masseuses, electricians, and a dominatrix—on duty with her date, which wasn't me)… but now I feel that it's no longer serving me to be a "student" of Japan. Don't get me wrong, I wanted to know and experience everything that I have. But at this point I've paid my dues… I have dedicated my life to this place, and after all these years I still don't feel fulfilled. We're just playing games at this point, and I'm done.

Basically, Japan broke my heart.

But maybe… MAYBE our *en*—a fatedness, a synchronicitous connection, a relationship with deep meaning to be pursued and discovered-- is real. And if it is, it will unfold in a way so beautiful I can't even imagine. And the signs are all there… after all, it was truly *hitomebore*: love at first sight.

2. *Love*

I had first gone to Japan on a whim—actually, it wasn't even in my plans. It was an overnight layover on my way back to school in Chicago after a summer in China, first studying abroad with the famously, masochistically difficult total-immersion Princeton in Beijing program

[52] It's usually white people who are really into anime or cosplay who *really* want to be Japanese, Korean and Chinese people taking it because they think it'll be easy, or grad students with a chip on their shoulder about "politics of [studying] language in Area Studies."

in advanced Chinese. It was a poignant time… I had saved up every penny I had to be able to participate, and to finally see Asia—a place I've been dreaming about for as long as I can remember, maybe because it seemed as far away as you can go (culturally *and* geographically) from my hometown in northern Vermont. Because beyond sheer interest, I always felt a familiarity with Asia… I was strangely drawn to with Japan as early as the third grade[53], when I struggled to make origami birds and boxes and wrote about it for a school newsletter.[54] Later in middle school, it struck me as odd (and sad) when a classmate from the comparatively cosmopolitan, nearby Quebec brought sushi for lunch and the kids of the Irish Catholic gangs who ran the town laughed and pointed at him.[55]

… but what's so weird about raw fish?

The same was true when I ate seaweed for the first time in Girl Scouts…

…what a great idea it is to eat this stuff!

I even signed out the pocket Japanese language guide in the library (along with books on the abdominal snowman, ESP, UFOs, and poems by the greats Shel Silverstein and T. S. Elliot) and tried to teach myself some phrases.

"Konnichiwa! YA o GEN-ki de-SU ka?"

[53] Actually earlier, when I asked my father at around age three: "If people from Japan are called Japanese, then what are people from China called?"
[54] "It was difficult, but we enjoyed!"
[55] To Marc Antoin Dunn: I'm sorry I didn't say anything and let those assholes make fun of you. It's really brave (and cool) that you brought sushi to Fairfield Center School… and in the 1990s, no less.

Anyway, it was an intense summer for which I had been groomed for two years. Apparently, I took to the Chinese language with natural ease, and my professors at the University of Chicago had asked to push me harder than the other students to realize what they saw as my potential to speak at the native level. I agreed because they made China seem like the best club in the world, and that the only thing you had to do to join was speak beautiful Chinese. Easy, right?[56] The thing is, the China of my dreams – a place I fantasized about as a kid going to the one Chinese restaurant in the country with my mother, gazing up at the fluorescent photos of the Great Wall… a place of ancient and mystical wisdom, temples, a society with knowing elegance – were shattered upon my arrival in Beijing. After all, it was the summer of 2007, a year before the highly anticipated Beijing Olympics, and the city was in the midst of a drastic transition: it was dusty, highly polluted, crowded, with people who looked to be dead or close to it wandering the train stations and tourist sites. Truly, Beijing was (and is) a post-Soviet (/communist) jungle that seemed to have paved over the China promised by the professors back at school.

Of course, I was wrong—and in several capacities. Really, the issue wasn't China but rather my Orientalist gaze that created unrealistic expectations. The amount of trauma and upheaval that this society has endured is beyond comprehension unless actually experienced, and considering the circumstances, China –as a society --has exhibited unfathomable fortitude, perseverance, and optimism. Indeed, it was this very aspect of China that not only moved me

[56] The thing is, Chinese really isn't that difficult because you don't have to conjugate verbs. The initial learning curve is steep, but studies have shown that people with perfect pitch (which I have) are able to learn Chinese with ease—and that around 40% of the population in China has perfect pitch themselves.

with time, but also got me to see the wisdom—the knowing elegance of the China in my dreams – that is still there. Even if the Great Wall is a ridiculous tourist trap…[57]

Plus, I learned that China is still very much a society of scholars, like in the olden days when they occupied the very top rung of society (which ironically contributed to its susceptibility to 19th and 20th century imperialism). Walking past the statue of Confucius on Beijing Normal University's campus to the first of my daily *five* hours of intensive instruction at 7:20 every morning, I found myself increasingly humbled and awe-struck as the summer drew on. I mean, the teachers were STRICT, and they pushed me harder than even the professors at school. What's more, they each seemed to have overcome incredible personal challenges to be in their position -- teaching at a prestigious university in the nation's capital -- and they expected nothing less than sheer excellence from us students in return. And since they knew their stuff forward, backward, and surely in other dimensions, I respected (and loved!) all of them from the bottom of my heart. Although it was a tough summer academically – I slept around five hours a night -- the bonds that were formed and the love that the teachers bestowed onto us, particularly that last night Beijing going out to Beihai Park and Wudaokou for beer gardens and karoke, selfies and strange meat on a stick, tears and hugs, made it all worth it.[58] The sign in our dorm that taunted us all summer turned out to be prophetic:

现在承受，以后享受: suffer now, enjoy later.

[57] You can, however, go to the *ziran changcheng*, or "Wild Great Wall," which are ruins totally free from tourism.
[58] And, of course, learning a crap-ton of Chinese.

Respect, and a deep kind of love that feels familial. I came to—and still do – think of China as a sibling: at once the most fun, and at times the most disgusting thing on the planet. Chinese public bathrooms? Good GOD… that's some next level shit (quite literally).

Since I had dreamed of Asia my entire life, and as this was just my second time leaving the US (except for Canada, but since I grew up so close to Quebec we didn't count our frequent trips up there as "going abroad"), I set off on a solo sojourn throughout inland and southern China for about ten days after the program ended to see the rest of the country. Armed with nothing but British Lonely Planet's pocket guide to China that I got for five bucks at Barnes and Noble a few days before leaving the US– and those dreams, of course -- I took a series of *ying zuo* hard seat trains from Beijing to Xi'an, Xi'an to Chengdu, and Guilin to Hangzhou. Let me tell you, there is nothing more profoundly uncomfortable than *ying zuo* trains… make no mistake, this is steerage class: the absolute bare-bones way to get around China. Indeed, I took that first train originally because of the price—about 40RMB, or 8USD, to get from Beijing to Xi'An. And honestly, even if I hadn't been flat broke, I would have bought it anyway because it was SO CHEAP. It excited me… I thought I was one a smart shopper. #hubris

Like, how bad can it be?

As it turns out, pretty bad. They don't turn off the lights… there are no assigned seats and finding a place to park yourself for the next 24 HOURS + is a free-for-all with people shoving you out of the way and weaving around your legs. Everyone is crammed—and "everyone" was, in the case of *ying zuo*, migrant workers who had apparently never seen a non-Asian person before and were therefore openly gawking at me for literal minutes at a time, touching my hair, or even stroking me. Now don't get me wrong, I understand where they were coming from and

wasn't offended by this, and I even let them touch me since it was pretty harmless (and their curiosity was warranted). One of the clinchers, though, was people getting wasted on the undrinkable *baijiu* Chinese white rice liquor, eating plastic bags of chicken parts—including suction-packed chicken feet-- with smacking lips and food particles flying everywhere, and the constant shouting about *nothing*. This included the ladies pushing carts of ramen through the aisle where people were squatting with all their baggage, shouting at the tops of their lungs at 3am:

FANG BIAN MIAN! FANG BIAN MIAN![59]

The seats were literally made out of plywood, and with a "table" that the "booth seats" shared no bigger than a lunch tray, these train rides were—and remain – the most physically uncomfortable I've ever been. By the time we got to Hangzhou – a 26-journey from Guilin – I was openly crying and even chanting to myself to get through it:

We're almost there. We're almost there. Two more hours. Never again. Never again…

Of course, the trip was a life-changing journey wherein all my limits were tested: physical, financial, and spiritual. In retrospect, the fact that I made it out in one piece with literally no planning whatsoever is basically a miracle. I got hustled, I got hit by a van *in my face* and knocked onto the street, I got violently ill accidently eating spoiled horse meat, I had two giant suitcases and a heavy backpack, the heavy dialects in inland and southern China were different than the Mandarin I had studied, my friends and family basically had no idea where I

[59] INSTANT RAMEN! INSTANT RAMEN!

was, I had almost no money, no phone, no internet, and barely any juice on my computer (and no electric converter)…

Ah, 19 years old and totally free.

By the time I got to Shanghai, I felt like I had been through the ringer… totally burned down to ashes, utterly exhausted. Yet I wasn't depleted… in fact, it was a curious state of peace—almost bliss. I had no expectations… the journey was done, the mission was complete. That final morning in Shanghai before boarding a flight with the always delightful ANA airlines (*'All Nippon' Airlines? What's 'Nippon?'*), I leisurely strolled around, satisfied with life, and thought to myself: *the only thing left to do is go to Japan for a night*.

I'll admit, a part of me wanted to stay in the airport and sleep—I heard Japan was really expensive, my clothes were all filthy, I was drained from almost two weeks hacking my way through inland China, and I wasn't sure what to do with my heavy backpack filled with Chinese textbooks and souvenirs. But when we landed at Narita International Airport – pristine and immaculate, almost eerily so – something told me to hit the town—to explore. I was excited… after all, this was Japan! It's safe, and the transportation is reliable so I'd definitely make my flight back… sure, why not? I waltzed through customs (after all these trips back and forth the past nine years, it has never taken me more than fifteen minutes to pass through immigration at Narita), asked two American brosephs in suits where a good place to "grab a beer and hit the town" was, and – armed with the impenetrable force field of having no expectations whatsoever – headed out to the place they recommended:

Roppongi.[60]

I got on the train – in retrospect, it was probably the *Keikyuu* line – and was instantly amazed, perhaps because of the contrast with China. Everything here was so clean, so orderly… and quiet! Velour seats on the trains? This was downright luxury! Plus, the only other person in the car was some guy in a business suit who wasn't even staring at me. I thought to myself, *Wow, this can't be possible… do I not register as hopelessly different here?* This was my first lesson about Japanese people: that being totally ignored is actually a sign that your presence is *extremely* acknowledged. I mean, he had to notice me…right? Like, he was ignoring me as *hard* – it was actually pretty ridiculous. So I stared at him as a sort of cultural chess match, but when he hopped off the train for his stop, I gave up: checkmate. Maybe in Japan, they aren't phased by perceived cultural differences...

And it was right when the doors closed and the train started pulling away that I saw the man *careen his neck* to stare at me in utter amazement from his spot on the platform.

HAHA, YESSSS! WE'RE STILL IN ASIA!!

I made it to Roppongi following the subway maps easily viewable in every subway car, and as soon as I made it out onto the street, I was blown away. The lights! The crazy, curly, cute language! The fashion! The hairstyles! Driving on the left side of the street! The restaurants! The *energy*! Somehow, despite how topsy-turvy it was, it all seemed so familiar, like I'd been

[60] …which I didn't know at the time is the seedy, yet extremely affluent neighborhood of Tokyo where the clubs for foreigners and Japanese people who want to get with them are located.

here before—as though I'd been searching for this place my entire life but didn't even know that I'd been looking. Picking a street on a whim and walking forward in a happy daze, soaking it all in, I bumped into a woman on the street.

"Hey, do you speak English?"

"Yes…"

"Cool! Do you wanna hang out with me tonight?"

"…OK!"

And this was when the night truly started to turn magical. We went to sushi, we went to some empty bar (it was a Tuesday night, after all) and requested Stevie Wonder to the DJ, we awkwardly danced and laughed, we went to a Don Quixote variety goods shop[61], we gazed at Tokyo Tower, we went to convenience stores (where I was amazed by the cleanliness and the automatic doors), we drank a cocktail in an all-night café and poured our hearts out to each other…

In retrospect, this was when I learned another enduring lesson about Japan and its people: that they can open up to you when if there's nothing to lose. We talked about everything and anything: things we've been through, past tragedies, all of our hopes and dreams for the future. Because we both understood we would probably never see each other again, we were able to open up to each other fully. We could be vulnerable… and that's when I learned that maybe this Japan place and I weren't too different from each other.

[61] You'll just have to look this up if you don't already know what it is. Basically, it's just so Japanese.

After all, I'm the same way…

Complete love and trust at first sight, with no expectation—it felt so right, so true. It felt like I had become aligned my destiny; I had never been so sure of anything in my life.

It felt like home.

After the sun rose and the trains started back up, my companion insisted on treating an express ticket back to Narita. Still in a sort of blissful shock that this night actually happened, I realized:

I love Japan.

And I promised myself: *I* will *live here.*

For the entire flight back, despite having not slept for days, I stayed awake for the twelve hours from Tokyo to Chicago writing in a diary about how much I loved Japan.

And I officially declared East Asian Languages and Civilizations as my major, and got a job working as a research assistant for a professor Japanese film after returning to school.

And went through the traumatic experience of taking Japanese.[62]

And wrote an honors thesis about Japan.

[62] Much to the disappointment and anger of my Chinese teachers. Maybe the break I've called with Japan is some kind of karmic retribution for the fact that I totally ditched China for Japan—which I even described in my diary on the plane ride as "the man I ran away with." In my defense, it was totally unplanned—it just happened, and I have no regrets; it was ultimately a good thing. But at the same time, there are consequences for everything—perhaps especially for true love. Something tells me I'm just about done paying off that spiritual debt, though. Also, learning Japanese is the worst because if you make a mistake, you're rarely just corrected and shown how to it properly, like in Chinese—it's instead taken as evidence that foreigners just *sigh* can never learn the "inherently difficult" Japanese language.

And applied to the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme to teach English in rural Japanese public schools… and got the job.

And moved to Hyogo Prefecture for two years…

And found a topic I could research about Japan…

…which I have done for the past seven years.

The following dissertation is therefore a culmination of making my dreams come true. Yes, my relationship with this country seems to be determined by cosmic forces outside of my control… it's not easy to make a life in Japan as a foreigner, but somehow I've done it—again and again. But now I need some time to know if it's real. Something tells me it is, but much like how Japan and I fell in love in the first place, it will be unplanned, spontaneous, natural, and completely out of my control.

Who knows… maybe it'll be like Amaterasu, the sensitive and beautiful sun goddess /giver of all light in the universe of Japanese creation myth who shut herself away in a cave after betrayals by the men in her life, Tsukuyomi and Susanoo. With no light in the universe, the other gods realized that the situation simply had to be fixed; the antics had been taken too far, and a grave mistake had been made. So they devised a lavish, absurd plot where another goddess was sent down to the entrance of the cave to perform striptease during which all the gods' laughter would surely pique Amaterasu's curiosity, ultimately luring her out of the cave. In the event that she would peek out, a mirror was placed outside the entrance so that she may be blinded by her own light and beauty, and thus restore light to the universe whether she was ready or not.

It worked.

And it just so happens that the first place I lived and worked in Japan is the island where the cave is said to be.

Ah… who knows how the future may unfold. #en

Section I: Aesthetics of Capitalism

For Suzuki-sensei

Japan is a place of contradiction. Manic *kawaii* かわいい cuteness plasters everything from traffic signs to kitchen sponge wrappers with nearly heart-wrenching pathos, while the second-highest suicide rate in the world is silently sustained by anonymous workers leaping in front of chains. The nation is famous for its culture of children's entertainment – the futuristic robot-cat Doraemon is a beloved character throughout Asia and Hello Kitty recognized around the globe – yet has the second lowest birthrate in the world, only above the city-state of Hong Kong, and its population is expected to further shrink by a full third by the year 2050.[63] Despite the economic Bubble Burst of the early 1990s, Japan still boasts the third largest economy in the world, second only to the juggernauts of the United States and China, and it seems that nearly every other woman riding the trains in Tokyo clutches a designer handbag – yet Japan also has the second highest level of poverty among nations in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.[64]

Indeed, domestic and international media representation of Japan as a futuristic dreamland markedly differs from the actual conditions of everyday Japanese life, or what Anne Allison has called its "precarious" condition-- particularly since the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disasters related to 3/11. In her analysis in the eponymous monograph *Precarious Japan*, the devastation and degree of denial necessary to keep living life "as usual" becomes

[63] Anne Allison, *Precarious Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 34. Also, adult diapers apparently outsell baby diapers in contemporary Japan.
[64] Ibid, 5. Noteworthy is that Japan is second only to the United States in this particular statistic.

something close to an omen—a reminder that life was, perhaps, not as stable pre-Fukushima as the rosy lens of retrospect would cast it:

> Though it may start in one place [3/11], precarity soon slips into other dimensions of life. Insecurity at work, for example, spreads to insecurity when paying bills, trying to keep food on the table, maintaining honor and pride (in one's community or head of household), finding the energy to keep going. It is not only a condition of precarious labor but a more general existential state – a state where one's human condition has become precarious as well… This condition of uncertainty, of rumbling instability, a terrain muddied – by debris, contamination, death – is what Japanese face as their country moves forward in this second decade of the twenty-first century."[65]

In the (literal) wake of the disasters, there was a sense of urgency filling the air, calling people to come together through a renewed sense of belonging to Japan, which Allison describes as "a homeland transformed by mud and radiation."[66] Amazingly, independent media and public figures challenged mainstream news outlets that remained vague on the details of what, exactly, was happening at Fukushima Daiichi. While government-sponsored advertising pushed the unbelievable idea that vegetables grown near the plant were safe to eat, and official determinations of the evacuation radius around the plant were shockingly conservative at 20 kilometers, independent researchers widely published their own findings, with very different results. No, the food (and tea leaves, for that matter) *wasn't* safe, and the evacuation radius would be better set at 80-120 kilometers. People everywhere seemed filled with hope--handmade signs reading *ganbarou, nihon* がんばろう、日本！(loosely, "Let's try our best and move forward, Japan!") were taped up in the windows of homes and convenience stores, and the popular clothing chain Uniqlo even sold special t-shirts designed by domestic and

[65] Ibid, 13.
[66] Ibid, 198.

international celebrities brandishing similar messages, with all proceeds going toward relief efforts. Prominent public figures were building momentum of anti-nuclear sentiment throughout the archipelago as well, with author Oe Kenzaburo leading anti-nuclear rallies in Tokyo, and musician Sakatamoto Ryuichi holding his "No More Nukes" music festival, with all proceeds donated to relief efforts. That the popular media, enmeshed with state interests, was being challenged on a national scale and in the group-minded society of Japan signaled hope: the brink of a spiritual awakening that would jettison Japanese society beyond consumerism with a renewed sense of grassroots-based community.

A year later, when I returned to Japan after being in the country during the disasters, I noticed something odd: that sense of support had all but disappeared. Riding the trains in Tokyo and mesmerized by the technology of LED video screens announcing train stops, line delays, trivia, and – of course – ceaseless advertising and announcements of *jinshinjikou*[67], I saw commercials, playing on loop, advertising Fukushima produce under a new campaign called "Fukushima Pride." Happy farmers holding peaches and greens flashed across the screen, along with the words *Fukushima wa genki desu yo!* – Fukushima's just fine! -- the whole scene was just surreal. And with most of the other passengers staring into their smartphones – *garakei* flip-phones had become obsolete between 2011 and 2012 -- no one seemed phased. It was just background noise… as if 3/11 had never happened.

[67] So-called "passenger injuries:" a euphemism for suicidal jumpers.

Chapter 1: Popular Music

For all those who have suffered "passenger injuries"

In this chapter, I show how capitalism can be understood as an aesthetic through an analysis of Japanese popular music (or J-pop). My examination includes three case studies, which each serve as expressions and examples of the capitalist aesthetic. In choosing three drastically different, yet nonetheless "popular" music groups in Japan today, I respond to popular music discourse – particularly on Japanese music – that limits discussions of this musical to categorization of its sound. For instance, Carolyn Stevens' *Japanese Popular Music: Culture, Authenticity, and Power* provides a neat summary of the different styles in Japanese popular music over the decades, such as *enka* ballads, *wasei* pop that hybridized American and Japanese musical styles, and idol (*aidoru*) groups. While she points out that the ever-changing landscape of postwar Japanese pop music reflects Japan's shifting identity from "conquered" to "customer,"[68] the idea of what constitutes "the popular" itself remains unquestioned. What is the relationship between the industry and the consumer-- and to what extent does the consumer actually influence popular music's changing sound? In what ways might these relationships challenge notions of "the popular"?

Given these questions, I apply a cultural studies approach to my analysis. As Harris Berger points out,

> Political meanings were ascribed to music in ways that seemed to have nothing to do with local perspective and everything to do with the scholar's political assumptions. A still developing literature, cultural studies was important in that it drew attention to the

[68] Carolyn S. Stevens, *Japanese Popular Music: Culture, Authenticity, and Power* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 37.

> role of power relations in music and acknowledges the importance of popular culture [itself] as an object of study.[69]

Even so, locating an entry point to study popular music is difficult because, as Fabian Holt notes: "[c]ategories of popular musics are particularly messy because they are rooted in vernacular discourse, in diverse social groups, because they depend greatly on oral transmission, and because they are destabilized by shifting fashions and the logic of modern capitalism."[70] The fluid nature of popular music's consumption thus requires a theoretical approach that is sensitive to the symbiotic relationship between the music industry and the consumer. After all, we must be sure to question whether the tastes of the consumer influence popular music's sound – and to ponder whether the industry actually manipulates those tastes.

By analyzing three artists' music that is very different, but nonetheless understood as pop I aim to show how J-pop creates and sustains notions of "the popular" through the industry's links to global capitalism: either in terms of the postwar geopolitics of popular music, the market potentials of postmodern malaise, or through links to state interests. The first case study, indie-gone-mainstream group Suiyoubi no Campanella, considers the change in sound and visuals in the group's music and videos since the group became a household name in 2015. I see the group's transition as an experimental control that reveals the West's continued socio-cultural influence on global popular culture, ultimately showing that popular music's sound and structure are linked through trans-cultural market sensibilities. For the second case study, Kyary Pamyu Pamyu, I cross-analyze the sonic and visual tropes employed in her hit songs and videos

[69] Harris M. Berger, "Phenomenology and the Ethnography of Popular Music: Ethnomusicology at the Juncture of Cultural Studies and Folklore," *Shadows in the Field,* 66.
[70] Fabian Holt, *Genre in Popular Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 14.

alongside Japan's relentless quest for socio-cultural identity, which I contend demonstrates the extent to which the West still looms in Japan's national consciousness more than seventy years after the unconditional surrender. The final case study, mega idol group AKB48, considers the J-J-pop's industry's recently appointed supporting role for Japan's economy, while understanding the fan culture (and the group's unique structure) as a mode of Foucauldian discipline.

In this chapter, I ultimately argue that Japanese popular music's sound and visuals are not so much a reflection of consumer demand, but rather an expression of the broader capitalist aesthetics outlined below: profit-driven, state-serving, and disciplining. In doing so, I hope to draw attention to the socio-cultural implications of the (popular) culture industry, and to direct academic discussions of popular music out of the archive and into a broader meditation on the effects of late capitalist life on society—in Japan, and beyond.

So without further ado – and adapting musicologist Robert Fink's quip "this is what minimalism *feels* like"[71] -- the music presented here is what capitalism sounds like.

Suiyoubi no Campanella and the Aesthetics of Globalization

On "Selling Out"

Kom_i (pronounced "komu eye") used to be a staple in underground Tokyo, but not as a performer-- she worked part-time as a bartender in a chic hotspot not experimental enough to be totally off the beaten path, but not mainstream enough to be left alone by the police officers who frequently drive by on suspicions of drug use.[72] It was at a house party while she was still a

[71] Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), xxi.

[72] As will be discussed at length in the chapter on underground music, police interest in underground clubs is linked to suspicions of drug use.

university student that she was chosen by two guys who were looking to put together group that could be internally self-sufficient: Kenmochi Hidefumi as the music/beat-baker and producer, Dir.F as a "jack of all trades" behind-the-scenes mastermind, and a to-be-determined frontwoman whom they found in the whimsical Kom_i.[73] And so Suiyoubi no Campenella (水曜日のカンパネラ "The Little Bells of Wednesday," a name devised by Kenmochi as one that sticks out, is not easily forgotten, and conveniently named after their usual rehearsal day) was born.

From their debut in 2013 until 2015, Suiyoubi no Campanella released mini-albums with around five songs per with the Japanese record label Tsubasa, which supports up-and-coming talent more than established stars.[74] During performances, Kom_i sings, raps, and dances alone on stage with only a laptop as her accompaniment, while Kenmochi and Dir.F remain out of sight. Unconventional though this personnel line up may be, their performances are noted for their quirky, engaging, and spontaneous energy – summed up well in a guerilla concert performed while Kom_i walked (and rapped, sang, and danced) through the packed streets of Shibuya in 2015.[75] With contemporary blends of electronica, techno, ambient and even jazz, and theirhigh-energy live performances and music videos that showcase Kom_i's manic-pixie-dream-girl appeal, Suiyoubi no Campanella soon garnered a cult following in Japan.

A typical video features Komu_I delivering pun-ny lyrics -- nearly always containing a catchy hook in the chorus -- that often rework Japanese or otherwise famous fairy tales, places,

[73] She was discovered at a house party, and was originally one of two front women until the group decided on having just one. See: https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2016/11/06/music/thank-god-wednesday-Kom_i-band-shaking-japans-pop-scene/
[74] The one exception was a vinyl release *Jugem' Je T'aime* with the label Specific in 2015.
[75] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f_8r3z3uCoE

or people halfway between rapping and singing with a breathy irreverence. The camera follows her around as she acts out the lyrics, dances freely while flailing her limbs in a hypnotically disorganized grace. Their music videos are like one-woman miniature movies with a clear plotline from start to finish— satisfying to watch, perhaps nearly addictive. By 2015, Suiyoubi had become increasingly well-known, and Kom_i in particular was quickly becoming a star. She landed interviews, photospreads in magazines, and a regular spot in the domestic gossip columns; abroad, she was profiled by MTV81 (MTV's channel of "the latest music and culture from Japan") and by Japan's premier English language online news source The Japan Times.[76] Kom_i's fresh, unthreateningly rebellious/delicate tomboy looks are decidedly current and, naturally, she began to land major endorsement deals.

Fig.2: Kom_i as the face for shoe brand Onitsuka Tiger and Yahoo! Auctions.

Although their first international performance was in 2016 at the annual South by Southwest festival in Austin, Texas, Suiyoubi no Campenalla had long amassed an impressive international audience through their presence on YouTube. Many comments on their videos are written in broken Japanese by Americans, praising the group's off-beat, yet catchy sound, or

[76] See: https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2016/11/06/music/thank-god-wednesday-Kom_i-band-shaking-japans-pop-scene/

professing their crushes on Kom_i. "Kom_i is so weird and I love her, writes one commenter[77]; another writes, "This is one of the best things I've found on the internet" for the video of *Sen no Rikyu*.[78]

Amidst increasing media presence, the group was set to release their much-anticipated first full-length album, *Zipangu,* in the fall of 2015. To build interest, singles were dropped on YouTube for the months leading up to the full release of the album in November, the crown jewel of which -- entitled "Ra" – unveiled a totally different aesthetic. It was as though the group realized that they were big, and that their next release could very well be their chance at international fame and fortune.

Basically, they sold out.

Anthropologist Ian Condry considers this complicated notion of "selling out" in *Hip-Hop Japan: Rap and Paths of Cultural Globalization*, using the early 2000's Japanese hip-hop collective Rock Steady Crew (RSC)-Japan as a case study. Tracking the group's struggle to land a major contract, he concludes that the question of whether or not a group has sold out misses the broader point that industry shapes the creative decisions that artists make throughout their careers:

> [RSC-Japan's] meaning of success revolved more around establishing their reputation than in garnering major sales. Strong sales could help their reputation, but if commercial success led to the group being viewed as a sellout, that is, performing just for money, it could pose substantial risks as well. The group's effort to navigate between these competing concerns illustrates that there is no clear line between the productive forces (cultural creativity) and the circumstances of production (economic expectations). *Rather, the dynamics of media businesses, as of businesses more generally, emerge from*

[77] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6Iv7O9qAHg
[78] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OfqjIlgSaAg

> *conventions decided by debates that usually operate in a context of uncertainty about success, and even differing understandings of what success might mean.* (186)[79]

It's true that the overall decisions regarding aesthetic and meanings of success are ultimately made by the artists, including whether to sign to a major label in the first place. But because RSC-Japan was never signed by a major label – due in large part to their demands that the group remain true to the Japanese hip-hop scene's ideals of authenticity[80] -- their aesthetic never had the opportunity to undergo the transition ushered in by industry pressures. There is no way to know from this example if economic expectations truly compete with cultural creativity.

A look at Suiyoubi no Campenalla's work before and after *Ra*, on the other hand, serves as an experimental control of the kinds of choices made by a group whose aesthetic choices have indeed changed after hitting the big time. Their pre-mainstream style is exemplified in their 2014 music video for the aforementioned *Sen no Rikyu* – a song based on the legend of the eponymous pre-Edo Period Japanese tea master/*yakuza* mafia kingpin. Kom_i puts on a one-woman show, acting out the two characters in the video's plot: a detective and an *ocha oni* お茶鬼 ("tea demon" of Japanese lore). As the detective, she struts around parks, shrines, and streets in Tokyo in an ensemble that she likely styled herself—relevant insofar that it points to down-to-earth production. Her second character, the tea demon, wears a demure gray *yukata* cotton kimono, which delivers an overall effect of contemporary "Japanese-ness" not necessarily performative, as *yukata* are common and fashionable in their own right in

[79] Ian Condry, *Hip Hop Japan: Rap and the Paths of Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 186.
[80] Ibid.

contemporary Japan.[81] The melody is catchy and, although electronic, has a certain analog quality to it – perhaps due to its one-of-a-kind blending of techno, rap, and hints of *onkyoukai* 漢字 low-volume minimal music found in some intersections of contemporary art music and underground Tokyo. Kom_i's performance in the video is quirkily charismatic as she weaves between her two roles; her (now famous) free spirit particularly shines through in the portion of the video where she dances wildly, freely, and totally choreographed. Overall, the audio and visuals of *Sen no Rikyu* are high-quality, but belie a certain DIY, local sensibility.

Fig. 3: Local Aesthetics in Sen no Rikyu

Ra stands in stark contrast. The video opens with high-quality CGI effects, marking the first appearance of this technology in any of their videos. Intensively processed electronic music serves as the backdrop to a soaring outer-space scene, with a squarely pulsating, EDM (electronic dance music) rhythm and synthesized melody. Kom_i soon appears – midriff bared -- adorned in a lavish, culturally appropriative Middle Eastern-inspired costume in a green screen

[81] It is an entirely normal occurrence to see a woman wearing *yukata* in Japan, not only for festivals (which occur year-round, and for which *yukata* are an entirely ordinary ensemble to wear) but also for work at places such as Japanese-style hotels or restaurants. Perhaps most importantly to drive my point home, no one bats a second glance at this.

reproduction of an ancient Egyptian landscape, complete with slaves and pyramids. After the song's introductory electronic pulse gives way to the verse section –by way of EDM's hallmark of a "beat drop," or an orgasmic return to or establishment of a primary rhythm following a melodic or rhythmic build-up – Kom_i dances in front of a cast of backup dancers, who join her in a highly choreographed dance sequence. Noteworthy is that most of these backup dancers are Western, and were therefore hired. Her vocals soon enter the mix, with singing that sounds somewhat strained, at times off-key; her rapping sounds overly practiced rather than nonchalant and carefree. And although her vocals are not usually precisely on-pitch, the effect here amidst the nearly distractingly sleek production quality of the video and sound comes off as somewhat unnatural, lacking the effervescent whimsicality of previous tracks.

Fig. 4: Debuting a new aesthetic in Ra

YouTube comments on the video reveal that fan reactions were divided by this new aesthetic. While some praised the production quality, others poked fun at the nearly corporate quality of the video. One Japanese fan writes: "I'm reminded of a Pantene commercial..."[82] Another bluntly put it: "Twice the budget and half the heart."[83] Indeed, there is nonetheless

[82] [パンテーンの CM 思い出した、、]

[83] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOY7hh_KplE&start_radio=1&list=RDGMEMQ1dJ7wXfLlqCjwV0xfSNbAVMIOY7hh_KplE

something about *Ra* that seems unlike the songs that generated the fan base which jettisoned Suiyoubi no Campanella toward mainstream success in the first place. As a result, the song and video seem alienated from its original domestic fan base, and poised toward enchanting a potential global audience. In fact, when I showed this video to a class I taught on Japanese music, one of my students quipped: "This looks like a Katy Perry video."[84]

The timing of this release, considered alongside trajectory of their career, suggest that Suiyoubi no Campanella adjusted their aesthetic to meet the standard of the global popular music market, perhaps to appeal to an international audience. The slick production, back-up dancers, elaborate costumes, and EDM-derived musical style of the song all nod toward broader trends in the contemporary popular music market. In their transition Suiyoubi no Campanella's changing aesthetic tell us what the aesthetics of the global popular music market, sound, and feel like—the first order of business of which is, well, business.

Indeed, the ceaseless pursuit of reaching the top—the most fans, the most fame – is entirely consistent with what Marx calls "capital's ceaseless striving towards the general form of wealth."[85] While Alejandro Madrid points out that "the concern with the abandonment of one's ideals and giving in to commercial trends has accompanied the development of progressive music manifestations at least since the nineteenth century," and that "the complex relationship between artists and the mass media at the turn of the twenty-first century makes loyalties more difficult to maintain,"[86] perhaps Suiyoubi no Campanella never had such ideals.

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[84] Conversation, April 2016. Interestingly, another YouTuber wrote almost the exact same thing: ケイティペリーすらダサかったのにさらにダサい。エジプトモチーフは難しいなあ。PV と歌詞はダッサいけど音とリズムはまじしゃれおつ (It is not only cheap like Katy Perry, but is even more so. The Egyptian motif is difficult to pull off, isn't it… the video and lyrics are cheap, but the music and [production quality] are quite stylish.")
[85] Karl Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 249.
[86] Alejandro Madrid, *Nor-tec Rifa,* 106.

Indeed, the very composition of the group-- a producer and videographer who were looking for an "it-girl" to front– suggests that they understood and anticipated pop music market trends from the beginning, particularly the importance of music videos and a strong internet presence in garnering a large audience. So, while it's tempting to assign judgement to the term "selling out," Suiyoubi no Campanella were (and are) simply following the rules of the popular music game, summed up by rapper/mogul Jay Z in the song *Diamonds from Sierra Leone:* "I'm not a businessman/ I'm a business, man."[87]

Tropes in Global Pop

1. *Structure*

Suiyoubi no Campanella change in aesthetic before and after mainstream success reveals the existence and nature of a dominating global popular music aesthetic. Suiyoubi no Campanella's career trajectory is just one of many examples of how the West has long dominated (popular) music culture across the globe, and contributed to what ethnomusicologist Timothy Taylor understands as a "global pop," or the ubiquity of a popular music culture across the globe that responds to and (re)interprets Western pop culture trends.[88] Indeed, the global pop phenomenon is reflective of a larger network of what critical theorist and anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has called "-scapes": ethno-, media-, finance-, media-, and ideo-, which form a complex web of social, political, and cultural exchange across the globe. While Appadurai argues that the United States is "no longer the puppeteer of a world system of images but is only one node of a complex transnational construction of

[87] Kanye West featuring Jay-Z, "Diamonds from Sierra Leone," Rockafella Records, 2005.
[88] See Timothy Taylor, *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

imaginary landscapes,"[89] this is not necessarily true for the dynamics of the Japanese pop music industry, which has operated in direct relation to the US pop market since the Meiji, Taisho, and early Showa eras (1868-1945).[90] Indeed, the very concept of music changed during this time, with the neutral *ongaku* coming to refer to Western music and the stigmatized *minzoku ongaku* and *hougaku* ("folk music") referring to indigenous musics; further, the idea of listening to music separate from a theatrical production or ritual was Western.

The trajectory of the J-pop industry has thus long operated according a Western model, itself defined by market-driven sensibilities, first and foremost. Social theorist Jurgen Habermas explains this as follows:

> Global markets, mass consumption, mass communication, and mass tourism disseminate the standardized products of a mass culture (overwhelmingly shaped by the United States). The same consumer goods and fashions, the same films, television programs, and best-selling music and books spread across the globe; the same fashions in pop, techno, or jeans seize and shape the mentalities of young people in even the most far flung places… the clocks of Western civilization keep the tempo for the compulsory simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous."[91]

In the case of Japan, increased contact with the Western world – particularly the US – in the years leading up to the Pacific War brought with it heightened exposure to popular American musical styles such as brass band arrangements and jazz, the latter of which remained popular well into the American Occupation, spurring a Japanese jazz boom that was thought to

[89] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 31.
[90] This certainly isn't to say that Japan does not have an indigenous popular music culture. *Hayari-uta* (popular song) styles, described by traditional Japanese music scholar Gerald Groemer as "ephemeral strains and verses often identified with professions or sectors of society that the country bumpkin could not and the samurai would not fully know," were performed vocally as early as the seventh century, and gained a significant following in the Tokugawa and Meiji eras with the development of the portable *shamisen* lutes and increased centralization of the population in the Tokugawa and Edo periods. (Gerald Groemer, "Popular Music before the Meiji period," in *The Ashgate Companion to Japanese Music*, 261-2, 265).
[91] Jurgen Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 75.

symbolize the aesthetics of democracy.[92] Immediately following the end of the Occupation, what was known as Wasei ("made in Japan") pop flooded the market with what Carolyn Stevens has described as a "sentimental yet playful genre of pop music that integrated American style with Japanese sensibility."[93] Kyu Sakamoto's 1961 international hit *Sukiyaki* is a representative example of this style: with a singer crooning a gentle, pentatonic five-tone melody resembling indigenous Japanese music over the sounds of an orchestra utilizing Western instruments, the song follows standard AABA verse-bridge-chorus form developed in New York's Tin Pan Alley in the 1920's. The historical trajectory of popular music in Japan, then, is not only linked to the US through Stevens' idea of cultural diffusion, that is, "connected in a variety of cultural traditions (both East and West),"[94] but demonstrates that the very idea of popular music – a short song with no theatrical component that follows an AABA format, and is consumable through technology at any time or place– is, itself, American in origin and conception.

Of course, claiming that contemporary popular music, which has had sixty years to incubate through repeated processes of globalization and localization, remains entrenched in American geopolitics is fallacious. At the same time, the pop music industry – global though its reach – seems to have developed an increasingly streamlined aesthetic, which we can glean from Suiyoubi no Campanella's change in aesthetic after hitting the big time. Returning to *Ra*, one can detect clear resemblances to American pop music, which reflect Habermas' hypothesis of the Western markets shaping those around the globe. Immediately, there are obvious nods

[92] See E. Taylor Atkins, *Blue Nippon: Authenticating Jazz in Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).
[93] Carolyn Stevens, *Japanese Popular Music: Culture, Authenticity, Power* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 41.
[94] Ibid, 62.

to American pop music in Suiyoubi no Campanella's aesthetic: AABA form, EDM-style beat drops, and interspersed English lyrics:

> Golden Rice
> Golden Spice
> Change Your Style
> Change Your Mind
> Change Your Life
> Ra!
> Go!" [95]

2. Commodoficatin of (Female) Sexuality

Beyond structure, there are other similarities between *Ra* and American the pop music aesthetics, which more subtly depict the Western-driven global market dynamic as described by Habermas. For one, Kom_i's midriff is bared; more of her skin is shown here than in any of the group's previous videos. This trend has continued in subsequent releases, which increasingly depict Kom_i as an object of sexual desire. In 2017's *Aladdin*, for instance, her naked body is cheekily hidden behind a giant bowling pin that *nearly* topples over (perhaps to the viewers' disappointment). In 2016's *Match Uri no Shojo* (マッチ売りの少女), she is seen seductively taking a shower and later rolling around a bed, sans makeup in morning sunlight, smiling coyly for the camera. The connection here with American pop music sensibilities is obvious: it nearly goes without saying that (female) American pop artists are highly sexualized. Some examples include Miley Cyrus, who gyrated against Robin Thicke's crotch at the MTV Music Video awards of 2013 and was shown masturbating in one of her music videos; Nicki Minaj, who has rapped about

[95] From *Ra*, off the album *Zipangu*, Tsubasa Records, 2015. English lyrics are actually quite common in J-pop; in addition to adding cosmopolitan flair, hey are thought to add a certain weight to concepts that the artists (or producers, as it were) wish to emphasize.

"dick icicles"[96]; and Ariana Grande who, in the video for 2016's "Side to Side" (itself a reference to having such hard intercourse that a woman can't walk straight[97]) is seen leading a pack of thong-clad women riding exercise bicycles, with the camera featuring more close-ups of their rear ends than their faces.

Fig. 5: Kom_i in 2017's Aladdin; *Ariana Grande in 2016's* Side to Side.

I will point out here that I in no way mean to shame these performers for these aesthetic choices. As Meredith Levande argues in her article "Women, Pop Music, and Pornography," pop stars are pressured by the pop music industry to strip down in performances to secure their relevance and, in recent decades, to champion what I see as a slippery incarnation of feminism wherein women are now encouraged to "[fight] for [the] right to be sexual without being called a slut."[98] What's slippery about this fourth wave of feminism is that the sexuality so often expressed in popular media obviously panders to the male gaze, which Levande points out is not only increasingly pornographic, but "in parallel with the increasingly intense and violent fare shown in actual pornography."[99] Although "sex itself is not

[96] The internet will readily provide multiple explanations for this.
[97] "The whole song is about riding leading to soreness." See: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/ariana-grande-side-to-side-meaning_us_57c71915e4b0e60d31dcc6c8
[98] Meredith Levande, "Women, Pop Music, and Pornography," *Meridians,* Vol. 8, no. 1 (2008): 306.
[99] Ibid, 300.

selling… but rather the buy-in notion that demeaning women's bodies in exchange for profit is acceptable," that Kom_i joins her American pop star sisters by becoming increasingly scantily clad in her videos underscores an important aesthetic of capitalism: if a profit can be made, then all's fair. Indeed, Levande points out that "what makes it tolerable for these women to perform the myth [of profiting off sexuality] is that they are portrayed as powerful."[100] Indeed, this limitless, nearly shameless drive for profit is the aesthetic of capitalism.

3. Cultural Appropriation

Ra is the first of Suiyoubi no Campanella's videos to be set somewhere explicitly outside of Japan in its depiction of the Middle East. In addition to belying increased production costs, the video – with clichéd images of pyramids, slaves, and a sexualized take on Middle Eastern clothing – flattens regional culture into a fashionable trend. Like the sexualization of (women's) bodies, cultural appropriation is a common trope employed in American popular music culture, who have infamously and insensitively used surface-level interpretations of culture in music videos. Examples include Katy Perry's 2013 performance of her song "Unconditionally" at the American Music Awards, where she was dressed as a geisha; Avril Lavigne's music video for her song "Hello Kitty,: and Gwen Stefani's phase in the early 2000's when she attended awards shows surrounded by a crew of her so-called "Harajuku Girls".[101]

Because analyses of popular music tend to focus on discussions of sonic content rather than intertextual relationships between media and society, such as Stevens account of J-pop,

[100] Ibid, 302.

[101] Noteworthy is that all of these examples see American pop stars appropriating Japanese aesthetics although, to be sure, cultural appropriation knows no racial or geographical limits. White artists have notoriously capitalized off of Black music and fashion throughout history, notably Elvis Presley, Vanilla Ice, Iggy Azalea, and others.

little – if any – has been written on cultural appropriation in the pop music industry. However, I hypothesize that the market-oriented production of pop music suggests that surface level visual or sonic (mis)representations of culture are strategically chosen due to what I understand to be their "freshness value": an aesthetic gap in mainstream media that can catch the attention of a mass audience. Similar to hypersexual imagery in media, what's problematic about cultural appropriation is not necessarily the shallow interpretation of culture, but rather that the culture is commodified through such representation in the first place. True to the capitalist aesthetic, we see the ceaseless dehumanizing aesthetic representations justified in the pursuit of profit.

4. Consumer-Based Fan Collectives

Third, since *Ra* and the subsequent release of *Superman* with the major label of Warner Japan, Suiyoubi no Campanella have begun selling a wide range products. One can now purchase items ranging from tote bags to rain ponchos to safari hats bearing the group's name and symbol. Not coincidently, cultivating fan loyalty around shared consumption is one of the hallmarks of contemporary popular music culture in America—and another aesthetic of capitalism. Most major pop stars in the US, for instance, even have trademarked nicknames for their followers, each of which display the hierarchical power dynamic between the artist and the fan through collectivizing or diminutive monikers: Beyonce's "Bey Hive," Lady Gaga's "Little Monsters," Taylor Swift's "Swifties," and so forth. Though the nicknames are harmless, the loyalty that they foster (and the hierarchy that's implied in them) equates "listener" with "consumer" when considering the rampant product placement in contemporary American pop

music. For instance, Lady Gaga and Beyoncé endorse dating website Plenty of Fish and mayonnaise replacement Miracle Whip in their 2010 video "Telephone"; Ariana Grande pushes designer brand Guess in 2015's "Side to Side"; Kanye West hocks for French fashion house Louis Vuitton in 2007's "Can't Tell Me Nothin'". While Suiyoubi no Campanella's references to famous Japanese brands in their music (Nikka Whisky in 2015's "Shakushain," for instance) are used to establish a mood or sense of place (the prefecture of Hokkaido, in the case of "Shakushain"), the fact that the consumption of popular brands is able to create a sense of community shows that consumption itself has become an aesthetic—and serves as another example of the capitalist aesthetic at large in (Japanese) popular music.

Fig. 6: Suiyoubi no Campanella's merchandise.

Conclusion

Suiyoubi no Campanella's transition from indie secret to international pop sensation reveals much about the nature of the popular music industry. That the group's post-mainstream aesthetic resembles trends in American pop music indicates that the United States continues to reign supreme in determining the aesthetic trajectory of an increasingly globalized pop music culture; at the same time, I conclude that this does not necessarily indicate the "Americanization" of societies around the globe. Rather, I suggest that the homogenizing force

is capitalism itself, which Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein argue either expands, or dies out (thereby rendering voluntary "ejection [from] the system pointless."[102]). By conceptualizing capitalism as an aesthetic, we can see its influence on everyday life – such a the sound and visuals of popular music – thereby giving consumers the chance to cultivate awareness of this system's pervasiveness. Although there is nothing inherently "wrong" with following pop music culture, perhaps Theodor Adorno's (albeit polemic) words can provide food for thought on the socio-political implications of the inherent hierarchical organizing powers of a capital-driven "culture industry":

> [People] force their eyes shut and voice approval, in a kind of self-loathing, for what is meted out of them, knowing fully the purpose for which it is manufactured. Without admitting it they sense that their lives would be completely intolerable as soon as they no longer clung to satisfactions which are none at all.[103]

Kyary Pamyu Pamyu and the Aesthetics of Postmodern Malaise

In my nearly four years working, studying, researching, and living in Japan, I've heard funny, inaccurate, and sometimes outrageous claims about this society, usually in the context of its superiority to other places (most often China, Korea, and the United States). Some notable selections:

- Japan is the only place in the world where beer is sold at baseball stadiums, which is why Japanese baseball culture is special
- Japan has the only cuisine in the world that builds up flavor from a base stock
- Japanese people must be especially intelligent because they can speak the most difficult language in the world fluently
- The Korean, Chinese, and Indian food sold in Japan is better than the food actually sold in Korea, China, and India

[102] Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein. *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (New York, London: Verso, 1991), 7.
[103] Theodore Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 103.

- Japanese is the only language in the world which has polite and humble forms, which makes Japanese culture special
- As an island nation, boasts the only "pure race" in the world

Maddening though these statements can be, particularly when intended for American ears (e.g., "Wow, this cake is good! I didn't think Americans made anything worth eating!"[104]), they aren't necessarily personal attacks. They are simply examples of *nihonjinron* – theories of Japanese people – put into practice.

Nihonjinron discourses primarily developed after the Pacific War alongside the proliferation of a streamlined mass media influenced by American cultural sensibilities. As Marilyn Ivy explains in the article "Formations of Mass Culture," the influx of American media during the occupation years deeply influenced Japanese socio-cultural identity. She writes,

> [Mediated] depictions of 'typical' American families [ala "I Love Lucy" and "Father Knows Best"] surrounded by consumer luxuries and electric appliances such as refrigerators, vacuum cleaners, and washing machines – and with the family car parked in the driveway – had a powerful impact on the Japanese psyche. The middle-class "American way of life" became the utopian goal and the dream of many Japanese in the 1950s, a goal tied to unflagging hard work as the basis for commodity acquisition.[105]

These mediated American "utopia" played into a historical tendency to negotiate socio-cultural identity in Japan, which is the foundation of *Nihonjinron.* Anthropologist Harumi Befu points out that, "[b]eing a Japanese term, *Nihonjinron* does conjure up a culturally specific concept not shared by any other culture. Thus use of the very term unwittingly reinforces the Nihonjinron assertion that Japan is unique and denies the possibility of a comparative treatment of

[104] このケーキはおいしい！アメリカ人はおいしい物なんて作れるって分からんかった!」I was told this in regard to some zucchini bread I made for a part-time job at a café bar in Osaka in 2017. Thanks? I'll note that I get told almost every shift that American food is simply inferior to the objectively delicious and sophisticated cuisine of Japan.
[105] Marilyn Ivy, "Formations of Mass Culture," in *Postwar Japan as History*, ed. Andrew Gordon. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, p. 242.

Nihonjinron."[106] She thus ultimately depicts Japan's quest for identity as only natural, given its history as first a lesser China, and later a lesser western nation:

> One reason that makes the question, "Who are we, the Japanese," so germane is that most Japanese are particularly interested in their national identity and have articulated their interest in a variety of ways, notably in published media, so much so that *Nihonjinron* may be called a minor national pastime. Search for identity is not unusual. The question, "Who are we?" haunts all of us at one time or another. It is a particularly pressing issue in a rapidly changing and complex society where one's identity simply cannot be taken for granted: as society changes, the former definition of self-identity no longer suffices and a new one must be created.[107]

After the economic Bubble Burst of the early 1990s and the concurrent disillusionment with the promises offered by capitalism – that the middle-class lifestyle not only delivers happiness, but is attainable and sustainable -- Japan's national identity has been ruptured by the empire's defeat in the Pacific War and by the now decades-long economic recession. As such, contemporary manifestations of Japanese identity is contingent on suturing this national trauma into a coherent narrative. Carol Gluck has argued that this desire has resulted in Japan's seemingly never-ending postwar, explaining: "The postwar chronology of establishment history traced an ever rising national trajectory from destruction to prosperity, from international humiliation to the status of economic superpower… [Official history] defined high-growth economics to include not only a world-class GNP, but also the myth of an entirely middle-class society and the triumph of a Japanese-style modern."[108] In other words, Japan's postwar economic growth – and continued economic prowess despite the post-Bubble recession -- has

[106] Harumi Befu, *Hegemony of Homogeneity: An Anthropological Analysis of* Nihonjinron (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2001), 13.
[107] Ibid, 3.
[108] Gluck, Carol. "The Past in the Present," in *Postwar Japan as History*, ed. Andrew Gordon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 72.

come to be equated with the equated with Japan's uniquely non-Western brand of modernity.[109]

At the same time, the socio-cultural desire to prove Japan's uniqueness in the first place indicates that the insecurities wrought by what I understand as the malaise of postmodernism. In this section, I show how Japanese pop music aesthetics reflects these anxieties, this time through J-pop star Kyary Pamyu Pamyu. Although her massive popularity has dwindled between the time of my fieldwork and the writing off this dissertation, I argue that the juxtaposition of futuristic and traditional tropes in her music and videos enacts a fantasy of Japanese (post)modernity. Through a close analysis of two of her biggest hits alongside contemporary commodity culture and recent efforts by the government to promote Japanese popular culture domestically and abroad, I ultimately aim to show that such fantastic representations of Japan demonstrate another aesthetic of capitalism: anxiety, escapism, and the quest for a cohesive national identity.

The Aesthetic of Consumerism in "Ponponpon"

Kyary Pamyu Pamyu became a household name in Japan in the wake of her massive debut album, *PamyuPamyu Reborushon* (PamyuPamyu Revolution), in 2011. A fashion blogger and street fashion staple on the streets of Tokyo's Harajuku neighborhood – widely acknowledged as one of the most important fashion centers in the world – her unique look

[109] Comments I've heard in Japan about "barbaric" Chinese people underscore this point, along with the recent trend of using *katakana* script – most often used for writing foreign words for which there is no Japanese equivalent – to write China (チャイナ) and Korea （コリア） on signs, advertisements, and so forth. Of course, China and Korea have *kanji* (a Japanese script used for nouns, and the stems of verbs and adjectives) equivalents, which is made all the more ironic when noting that this script originally came from China and was used in Korea for millennia.

caught the attention of a music producer Nakata Yasutaka, who encouraged her to release music.[110] Her psychedelic music videos went viral across the globe, and in 2014 MTV dubbed her the "Princess of J-pop." Since becoming a household name, Kyary – like Suiyoubi no Campanella's Kom_i – has a slew of endorsement deals under her belt, having served as the face of Adidas Japan, eyeglass chain store Alook, apartment locator service Sumou, and others.

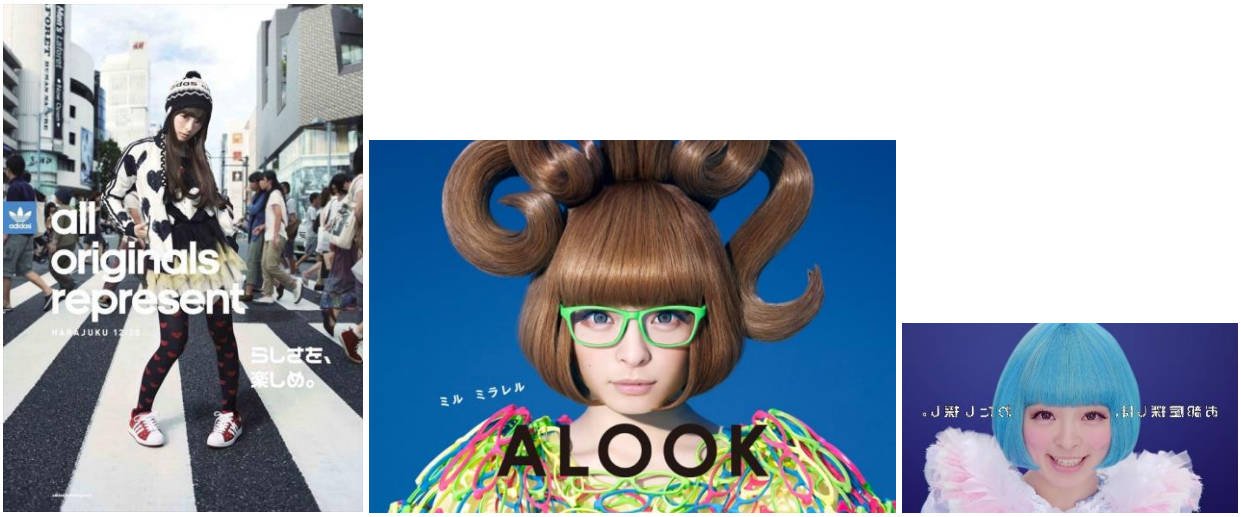

Fig. 7: Kyary Pamyu Pamyu's endorsements.

Nearly everything about Kyary Pamyu Pamyu's music and performances is fantastically *kawaii*, which translates as "cute" but holds connotations of childlike-ness and vulnerability. In *The Image Factory: Fads and Fashions in Japan,* Donald Richie explains the nuances of *kawaii*, as well as its societal import in Japan:

> In the West, we are admonished by the highest authority to 'put away childish things'. In Japan, however, as a newspaper editorial recently stated: 'Experts consistently point to the importance of cuteness in the Japanese value system. Cuteness is considered to be good and a virtu e. Unlike their counterparts in the United States and Europe, youth in Japan feel less pressure to grow out of childhood and rush into adulthood.[111]

[110] See: http://www.mtv.com/news/1888295/kyary-pamyu-pamyu-pika-pika-fantajin/
[111] Donald Richie. *The Image Factory: Fads and Fashion in Japan*. 54

Kyary's music and videos epitomize these innocent, childlike qualities of *kawaii*: she sings in high-pitched, nasal, infantile vocal timbre, her lyrics are pun-filled and often nonsensical, and her songs sample sounds reminiscent of childhood such as xylophones and music boxes. Her now iconic fashion sense, which has earned her the nickname "The Lady Gaga of Japan,"[112] sees her dressing in bright colors, conceptual and geometric costumes, oversized hair bows, combat boots, and heavy makeup to make her appear doll-like and desexualized – and therefore unthreatening, in true *kawaii* fashion. Further, her videos often feature her stomping around, perhaps playing with toys or just gawking at the world around her, in a whimsical, playful, childlike way; she is utterly unburdened by duty and social convention.

2011's *PonPonPon* exemplifies this aesthetic, and is noteworthy because it was the first of her videos to go viral. Kyari, dressed in an extremely *kawaii* outfit, coos about how fun it is to "ponponpon" anywhere and anytime one gets the chance. Although the meaning of "ponponpon" is never specifically identified, one can infer from silly melody and head-bopping 2/4 rhythm that, like the music itself, it means to go happily and absent-mindedly with the flow. The video further hints at this meaning; in what has come to be her signature dance style, she jumps from foot to foot, spins in circles, and even hops on a pogo stick in a room filled with an ever-changing background assortment of colorful *things*. These range from stuffed animals to

[112] Itself a strong commentary on Japan's penchant for finding identity juxtaposed to a looming other.

masked, overweight, dancing figures in dresses, flying bats, and multi-colored skulls.

Fig. 8: PonPonPon

The audience is thus transported into a *kawaii* world far away from Japan's present reality, which Anne Allison has described as "an environment where everyone moves so fast to accomplish more and more every day [that] human relationships once so prized in society have begun to unravel, [and] in lifestyles that might include a daily commute of four or five hours [wherein] Japanese spent increasingly more time alone."[113] The *kawaii* aesthetic of *PonPonPon* can be seen as an antidote to these conditions.

The idea that *kawaii*'s ubiquity in contemporary Japan is reactionary to everyday doldrums is explored by Japan scholar Christine Yano through her analysis of international *kawaii* mascot Hello Kitty in *Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty's Trek across the Pacific*. She explains:

> The heightened valence of *kawaii* and the nostalgia for an idealized childhood that it circumscribes directly points to adulthood as burdened with responsibilities and obligations. This kind of nostalgia pits the freedom of childhood against the restrictiveness of adulthood. Within this context, kawaii represents a temporary state of

113 Anne Allison, "New-age Fetishes, Monsters, and Friends: Pokémon Capitalism at the Millennium," in *Japan After Japan*, ed. Tomiko Yoda and Harry Harootunian (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 334.

> abnegation. Surrounding oneself with kawaii objects may be interpreted as pure escapism.[114]

This ubiquity of the *kawaii* aesthetic can thus be understood as relational to the alienation and anxiety burdening the typical life in Japan, where work days can last upwards of sixteen hours a day, daily commutes on the train clock in an average of three hours, and whatever remaining time a person has is co-opted by tacitly mandatory *enkai* 宴会 and *nomikai* 飲み会 work parties.[115]

That Hello Kitty and other countless *kawaii* character goods available for purchase as stuffed dolls, keychains, on packaging, in advertisements, campaigns, and other such forms also suggest that that *kawaii,* as a commodity, offers consumerism itself as route to happiness. Anne Allision explores this idea in her article "New Age Fetishes, Monsters, and Friends: Pokemon Capitalism at the Millenium," where she points out that the underpinnings of Pokemon and its *kawaii* cast of characters constitutes "a millennial dream world of enchanting goods and virtual relations in which monsters double as both capital and pals."[116] This "gotta catch 'em all" mentality creates a sense of purpose within the otherwise empty promises of fulfillment offered by consumption – which is heavily encouraged in through the advertisements, campaigns, and goods appealing to the pathos of potential customers with *kawaii* branding. Indeed, the desire to obsessively collect is what Azuma Hiroki understands as postmodernism's primary manifestation in Japan, embodied by the *otaku*, or obsessive collector usually of pop culture artifacts (notably of anime and manga—and, of course, *kawaii* artifacts). Azuma

[114] Christine Yano. *Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty's Trek across the Pacific* (Durham: Duke University Press), 57.
[115] A good friend's boyfriend works these hours as a computer programmer in Tokyo, and actually keeps a second apartment close to his job in case he gets off after midnight.
[116] Yano, *Pink Globalizatin*, 336.

explains: “Otaku shut themselves into the hobby community not because they deny sociality but rather because, as social values and standards are already dysfunctional, they feel a pressing need to construct alternate values and standards.”

Returning to *PonPonPon*, Kyary’s contentment dancing around a room – alone – while surrounded with *kawaii* objects is deeply symbolic: she both enacts the bliss promised by the sirens of consumption, and offers an escape for consumers of her music video through its ceaseless parade of the *kawaii* aesthetic. Beyond *kawaii*, the repetitive, nonsensical sonic and visual display of *PonPonPon* lulls the audience into what musicologist Robert Fink has identified as the aesthetics of consumption in late-capitalist (American) society, embodied in repetitive music not necessarily limited to American minimalism (notably composers Steve Reich, Philip Glass, and Terry Riley). Arguing that postwar advertising and consumer culture has infiltrated cultures of musical expression, Fink draws a humorous, yet thought-provoking connection between everyday life, consumerism, and musical aesthetic:

> While junior was out behind the Piggly-Wiggly getting high on weed, and his sister was studying Transcendental Meditation at the local YMCA, Mom was getting stoned *inside* the supermarket by the endlessly repeating labels on the Campbell’s soup cans. Meanwhile La Monte Young was becoming fascinated by the rhythmic pulsations of the electric motor that powered his tortoise’s terrarium, and Steve Reich was listening to tape loops cycle in and out of phase for hours.”[117]

Like repeating soup can labels in the supermarket or minimalist tape loops, *PonPonPon*’s colorful and hyper-stimulating stream of visuals, and repetitive, uncomplicated melody with equally repetitive, nonsensical lyrics provides its audience with the mindless repetition that Fink calls “the markers of the mercantile sublime, of the attempt to represent desire *as it is truly*

[117] Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, 77.

experienced within the consumer society: as a transsubjective effect of the system of objects, a system whose scale, scope, and discursive intensity dwarfs human consciousness."[118] Basically, *PonPonPon* not only attempts to show you, through visuals and sounds, that consumption is the path toward bliss; it replicates the very trance-like state of consumerism itself by taking you out of the present.

To summarize, Kyary Pamyu Pamyu's *kawaii* aesthetic in *PonPonPon* offers its audience an escape route from the drudgeries of everyday (Japanese) life through the presentation of a fantastic anti-reality that brings the audience back to less complicated times. As Donald Richie explains,

> Perhaps behind the ubiquity of *kawaii* aesthetic is some urge to return to the golden age of undisciplined, permissive, Japanese childhood, but the implication would seem rather to be that we are all as harmless as children. Look at us: we make fools of ourselves, we invite you to laugh at us, and yet we are so harmless that your laughter cannot but be indulgent, that your hand cannot but reach into your billfold. The cute is commercialized. I am a small child (or a small animal), I am affectedly attractive.[119]

Ironically, this aesthetic encourages the consumer-based alienation and anxiety that from which audiences seek refuge in the first place. *Kawaii,* then, is a commodity – and its aesthetic embodies the empty promise of consumer culture.

The Aesthetic of Identity Crisis in *Ninja re Bang Bang*

Kawaii is big business in Japan, and in recent decades has appealed to international markets as well. Hello Kitty and Pokémon, for instance, are household names across the planet. Across the United States, which has long dominated global media and cultural markets, fans of

[118] Fink, *Repeating Ourselves,* 116.
[119] Richie, *The Image Factory*, 60.

Japanese manga comics and *anime* cartoons gather at cosplay (costume play) conventions dressed in *kawaii* styles as their favorite characters. In fact, the *kawaii* aesthetic is so recognizable in the United States that the sketch comedy show Saturday Night Live has poked fun at stereotypes of its most dedicated followers – namely cosplayers – in a skit called "J-pop America Funtime Wow!" The bit follows the woefully misguided interpretations of Japanese culture by Jonathan-san and Rebecca-san, who are continually corrected by their exasperated, deeply ashamed Japanese Studies professor. One of the funnier scenarios sees these anti-heroes explaining the "ancient origins" of the Japanese word for teacher, *sensei* 先生. As they embark on a long-winded explanation of how it translates to "born first," and therefore reflects the deep respect for ancient wisdom that pervades even the most futuristic parts of contemporary Japanese society, Professor Kauffman finally interrupts to bluntly inform the audience that, "No, no, it really just means 'teacher.'"

Ironically, Jonathan-san and Rebecca-san's overly simplified interpretation of Japan as an ancient and mysterious culture crossbred with futuristic, manically cheerful *kawaii* sensibilities is exactly how the Japanese government seeks to rebrand its national image – precisely because these aesthetics have attracted an international audience, and are thus profitable. To investigate the nature of government's recent relationship with pop culture, I conducted a series of interviews with cabinet members from the Ministry of Education, Trade, and Industry (or METI) and the Ministry of Finance in the spring of 2015, both of whom detailed the government's joint strategies with the private sector to "rebrand Japan's image, both

domestically and abroad."[120] According to the interviews, the now famous Cool Japan campaign – which began around the year 2005, with more formal implementations starting in 2007— showcases various facets of everyday Japanese life ranging from pop culture trends, like the *kawaii* aesthetic, to the sophisticated technology of automated toilets. Cool Japan's campaign is both published and televised, with an eponymous television show and essay collection, published in 2008, featuring succinct two-page "chapters" on these everyday quirks. According to the Japan Revitalization Strategy documents I was given during my meeting with a member from METI,

> The government will place Cool Japan as the national strategy and strengthen these efforts through public-private sector joint efforts to effectively transmit content based on rich Japanese culture such as traditional and regional culture and 'Japan's attraction' including Japanese food and Japanese alcoholic beverages, which eventually leads to fostering of industries and incorporation of overseas demands.[121]

Liasonships between the Japanese government and pop culture insiders are particularly strong; in fact, the Popular Culture "task force" boasts seven members who are either record company executives, producers, or concert promoters.[122]

During these interviews, I was also introduced to the more recently established Japan Brand campaign, a political project not necessarily intended to be known on a public scale, which been designed to work in tandem with Cool Japan to boost perceptions of Japan's geopolitical moral conduct. In the official Cool Japan proposal, Japan Brand and Cool Japan are

[120] Anonymous (Ministry of Education, Trade, and Industry), interviewed by Jillian Marshall, Tokyo, Japan, March 2015.
[121] METI, "Japan Revitalization Strategy" documents, revised 2014, 135
[122] METI, "Task Force Relating to the Music Industry and International Development," 1.

designed with the explicit intent to "win the world's sympathy," and are conceived based on the following logistical framework:

> Japanese culture in recent years has been attracting the world's attention more than before. Japanese cuisine in increasingly popular and has been listed as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, with sushi now being enjoyed worldwide. The creation of many innovative products by Steve Jobs, who studied Japanese Zen Buddhism, has helped to popularize Xen in many places in the United States. A study by Adobe Systems Inc. (Adobe State of Create Study, 2012) has named Tokyo and Japan as the world's most creative city and country, respectively. This reflects the world acclaim and sympathy regarding Japanese culture and creativity, which undoubtedly works positively for Japan today... Cool Japan is a national movement encouraging the Japanese people to fully exercise their voluntary creativity in the international community. The term 'creative' in this proposal not only means the production of artwork and design work, but also the creativity of anyone that helps to develop a business and new schemes, makes innovative attempts, and forms relationships that result in interaction. [Cool Japan and Japan Brand] are expected to help Japan becomes a country that strongly supports its creative and continues to develop businesses that can generate new values not only as a short-term, one-year policy, but also as a medium-to long-term vision of the Cool Japan policy.[123]

To this end, Japan Brand has hosted a series of interactive lectures in Africa and South America aimed to demonstrate Japan's commitment to international service, while demonstrating what are hoped to be seen as the "altruistic aspects" of Japanese society, such as respect for elders, respect for public property, and reverence of elders. Japan Brand also has another primary objective: to build shopping malls around the world that exclusively sell what have been identified through sales analysis as potentially popular Japanese products – Hello Kitty and other character goods, games, comics, and of course, J-pop. I was informed that there are plans for several of these malls to be constructed in the United States, South America, and Southeast Asia, with hopes to build on other continents as well. Locations have been

[123] Cool Japan Movement Promotion Council, "Cool Japan Proposal," 2.

strategically chosen according to statistics that reveal where interest in Japanese culture exists, and can be maximally expanded. [124]

When I asked what the overall goal of these efforts are, the cabinet member from METI told me, rather solemnly, "our primary goal is to make money," along with portraying Japan's "unique quirks" as cultural capital "able to compete with America's cultural ubiquity"—a particularly urgent objective with the upcoming 2020 Tokyo Olympics looming near. [125] How does METI plan to do this? By "introducing Japanese popular culture to the world," which will thereby increase tourism through its "inherent appeal." I was sure to point out that the pop culture industry is a risky basket in which to put all of one's eggs due to its inherently fickle nature, citing the striking lack of popularity of K-pop in Japan just five years after the height of the Korean Wave, and the failure for the Hallyu movement to generate any lasting international interest in Korean culture-- popular or traditional.[126] Taking pause, my interlocutor rather unconfidently replied that this shouldn't happen because "this is Japan, not Korea" – and added that failure simply isn't an option, because there is too much money involved at this point for

[124] Anonymous (Ministry of Education, Trade, and Industry), interviewed by Jillian Marshall, Tokyo, Japan, March 2015. Locations include the west coast of the United States, where there is "more interest in Asian culture in general," and in South America, where there is an apparently surprisingly large J-pop fan base.
[125] Anonymous (Ministry of Education, Trade, and Industry), interviewed by Jillian Marshall, Tokyo, Japan, March 2015.
[126] Tokyo's Shin-Okubo neighborhood, one of the city's Koreatowns, saw K-pop music and variety goods stores pop up to meet the huge demand for all things Korea. From music to dramas to face cream to seaweed. Subsequent trips to Shin-Okubo during my primary fieldwork led me to a ghost town of empty Korean Wave stores. A conversation I had with a local shop keep confirmed that sales took a nosedive around 2013, when K-pop's popularity began to dwindle, and that their only regular customers now are housewives who remain diehard fans of the most enduring, classic idols, notably Pei Yonjun and Jang Geunsuk. Similarly, Osaka's Korean neighborhood of Tsuruhashi has a few K-pop goods stores seemingly hanging on by a thread, while others are boarded up.

any other outcome to be thoughtfully considered.[127] Specifically, 15,500 million yen (or around 155 million US dollars) has been invested in Cool Japan initiatives.[128]

As suggested by my interlocutor's rather grim comment about the purpose of these campaigns– and a subsequent email he sent to me apologizing for the frankness of our discussion, while hoping that I "still love Japan"[129] – an outcome of the efforts of Cool Japan and Japan Brand is that Japan *itself* has become both an aesthetic and commodity. With their emphasis on Japan's uniqueness, Cool Japan and Japan Brand enact what Naoki Sakai has identified as Japan's contemporary identity crisis. He writes:

> … (the) rhetoric of Japanese culturalism [which] has been obsessed predominantly with the image of Japanese distinctiveness… [yet] such a rhetoric was produced only in contrast to some fantastic image of Western culture against the background of the cartographic imaginary of the globe. The Japanese cultural identity was produced with a view to some imaginary observer who is positioned outside the organic whole of the Japanese nation. And this imaginary observer is habitually referred to as the West, often symbolizing U.S. hegemony.[130]

Indeed, both programs have been crafted according to a Western Gaze – evidenced by Cool Japan's reliance on foreign approval to showcase Japan's "uniqueness," and Japan Brand's effots to *gain* foreign approval through strategic altruism and the simultaneous expansion of Japanese commercial enterprise. In doing so, these programs have presented Japan as commodities whose very commercial appeal is that they are recognizably "Japanese."

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[127] Anonymous (Ministry of Education, Trade, and Industry), interviewed by Jillian Marshall, Tokyo, Japan, March 2015.
[128] METI, "Cool Japan Initiative" documents, June 2014, 4.
[129] Anonymous, email exchange, March 2015.
[130] Naoki Sakai, "'You Asians': On the Historical Role of the West and Asia Binary," In *Japan After Japan: Social and Cultural Life from the Recessionary 1990s to the Present*, ed. Tomiko Yoda and Harry Harootunian (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 87.

To be sure, Cool Japan and Japan Brand have been successful insofar that Japanese popular culture continue to amass an audience in the West. Indeed, Kyary Pamyu Pamyu has quipped that she should retire in France "where [she] still has popularity"; unsurprisingly, she has also served as a mascot for the Cool Japan campaign. Even so, her international appeal seems to be waning, as her aesthetic hinges on, in the words of my class at Cornell to whom I showed the music video for her 2012 hit *Ninja Re Bang Bang*, one thing: "it's just *so* Japanese."

Fig. 9: Kyary Pamyu Pamyu for Cool Japan.

The music and video for *Ninja re Bang Bang* sees a blending of aesthetics that have come to be defined as "so Japanese" through the efforts of Cool Japan and Japan Brand, and through non-Japanese pop cultural understandings of Japan in general upon which the success of these campaigns relies. The song opens with a chiptune, or Gameboy derived melodic intro that gives way to a bouncy, pentatonic theme with Kyary's breathy vocals cooing nonsense

syllables that loosely rhyme with the word “ninja” – perhaps one of the most internationally well-known mascots of Japan. In fact, her entrance sees her dressed in a colorful ninja costume, singing through a megaphone and dancing atop an animated coy fish that is swimming through a landscape of futuristic skyscrapers. As the song moves to the bridge, Kyary is dressed as a geisha while surrounded by dancing animated robots – a futuristic aesthetic that has also come to symbolize Japan. Throughout the entire song, tropes of Japan as an ancient, mysterious civilization are juxtaposed with the futuristic, *kawaii,* postmodern whimsy that, as seen in *PonPonPon,* have also come to be recognized as “Japanese”—and depended upon as a lucrative commodity.

Fig. 9: Tropes of “Japaneseness” in Ninja re Bang Bang.

Conclusion: National Identity in the Age of Consumerism

While Kyary Pamyu Pamyu gained an international following, her career was originally conceived as a domestic project, and her first and second albums were more successful in Japan than they were abroad. And although she does not go on tour as much in recent years due to her decreasing cultural relevance, my attempts to see her live in Japan in Tokyo in the spring of 2015 were utterly thwarted when tickets sold out within minutes (and scalped tickets were being sold at unreasonable prices on Yahoo! Auctions). Clearly, there is something about her “Japanese” aesthetic that is still appealing to Japanese, as well.

Returning to Carol Gluck's assertion that high-growth came to define the postwar, along with the "myth of an entirely middle-class society and the triumph of a Japanese-style modern,"[131] I conclude here that these myths have become even more important following the Bubble Burst and the continuing recession under the Shinzo Abe's ineffectual "Abenomics" fiscal policy.[132] As the promise of a socio-economic "happily ever after" has been continually dashed in the recessionary decades following the Bubble Burst, Japan finds itself in yet another identity crisis. The juxtaposition of "traditional" and "futuristic" tropes in *Ninja re Bang Bang*, then, weaves Japan's continuously severed national identity – from the Meiji Restoration to the Pacific War to the Bubble Burst – into a single tapestry, where the past and the future seamlessly mingle in a timeless present. Kyary Pamyu Pamyu's mass popularity in Japan during the first few years of her career underscore desire, while enacting the fantasy of purpose and destiny in what Etienne Balibar and Immanual Wallerstein have identified as a crucial step in forging national identity. In *Ambiguous Identitites: Race, Nation, Class,* they write:

> The illusion [of historical representation]… consists in believing that the generations which succeed one another over centuries on a reasonable stable territory, under a reasonably univocal designation, have handed down to each other an invariant substance. And it consists in believing that the process of development from which we

[131] Carol Gluck, "The Past in the Present," in *Postwar Japan as History,* ed. Andrew Gordon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 72.

[132] Similar to the trickle down economic policies implemented in the United States under the George W. Bush administration, tax cuts are provided to major Japanese corporations under the auspices that their (projected) growth will make its way down to the working class. Unfortunately, such policies– along with the strategic weakening of the yen by nearly forty percent in the past five years, and the progressive increase of sales tax – has profoundly impacted the middle class for the worse. In fact – like the US – the middle class in Japan has been shrinking, with fewer jobs available to qualified applicants, and a population of young people working (known as フリーター *furi-ta,* or "freeters") on a part-time basis either because they couldn't find stable employment, or have chosen to opt out of what is increasingly seen as a broken system.

> select aspects retrospectively, so as to see ourselves as the culmination of that process, was the only one possible, that is, it represented a destiny.[133]

The commodification of Japan through Kyary Pamyu Pamyu and J- aesthetic more generally reflect the crisis of national identity facing late capitalist society at large. In his discussion of the formation of Japanese culturalist rhetoric, for instance, Sakai is sure to point out that:

> … neither the West nor Asia is a mere illusion that one can dispel by adjusting one's mental attitude. They are social realities even if they are of an imaginary kind. However, if the distinction between the West and Asia is increasingly independent on geography, race, ethnic culture or nationality but is a matter of cultural capital shaping the individual's socioeconomic status, one can be attentive to the socioeconomic formation of the qualifications in terms of which the West and Asia are distinctively and performativity presented and to how people invest in the acquisition of such qualifications.[134]

As "culture" has become increasingly commodified, consumerism can thus be understood as a performance of national identity. This is particularly poignant the case of Kyary Pamyu Pamyu, who rectifies Japan's history through her ultra "Japanese" aesthetic.

Kyary Pamyu Pamyu's popularity in Japan only lasted a few years, and her career is now hinged on the fleeting relevance of Japan as a pop culture commodity. But as this section has aimed to show, commodification of culture and mindless consumerism are aesthetics of capitalism. Unfortunately – and much like Homer Simpson's views on beer -- consumption is both the cause of, and solution to, these problems.[135] Hence, national identity crisis itself is

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[133] Etienne Balibar and Immanual Wallerstein. *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (New York, London: Verso, 1991*),* 86.

[134] Naoki Sakai, "'You Asians': On the Historical Role of the West and Asia Binary," in *Japan After Japan: Social and Cultural Life from the Recessionary 1990s to the Present*, ed. Tomiko Yoda and Harry Harootunian (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 187.

[135] "To beer: the cause of, and solution to, all life's problems."

another aesthetic of capitalism.

AKB48 and the Aesthetics of Fascism

> What's up Japan!
> Can you hear me?
> Is life gettin' you down? No money, no job, too much bad news?
> Well, there's no reason to be down! It's time to get UP!
> We have a hot new song that's from AKB48 to make you feel GOOD!
> Koi Suru Fortune Cookie!
> So dance, Japan! CRAZY! [136]

According to AKB48, your problems aren't real; they can be erased with easy melodies, short skirts, bubblegum lyrics – and your loyal fandom.

There are many *aidoru kei* アイドル系 idol groups in Japan, seemingly for every niche interest held by a potential audience. For those interested in a classic, all-star cast of strong and sassy women, there's *Morning Musume*; for those who like their girls a bit chubbier, there's *Pottya*, one of several "chubby" idol groups whose music videos feature the members eating donuts and second helpings of their lunches.[137] For lonely housewives, teenage girls, and generally broken-hearted women, there are male idol groups who croon about unrequited love, wanting to be a perfect gentleman for one special woman, and other topics that enact popular fantasies of romance.[138] Though there is a wide variety of J-pop idol groups, they share a common characteristic of portraying members as infantilized, non-threatening, and generally upbeat.

[136] Akimoto Yasushi, *Koi Suru Fortune Cookie*, performed by AKB48, released 2013.
[137] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XlM8hb_O7Dw
[138] Jennifer Robertson discusses this phenonmenon at length in her brilliant account of the all-women's Takarazuka theater. See: TAKARAZUKA BOOK

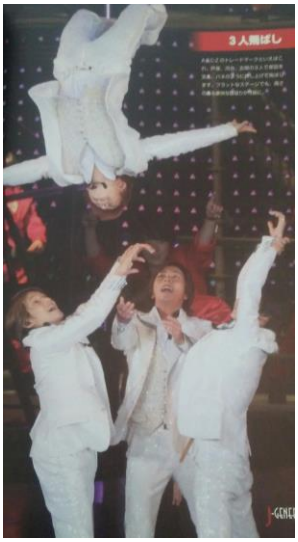

Fig. 10: A snapshot of the boy idol group Johnny's *enacting popular female fantasies in the magazine* J-Generation.

But none of these groups can compare to Japan's ultimate idols: AKB48. As the most popular idol group in Japan's history, AKB48 boasts forty-eight *kawaii*-cute school girls clad in coordinated, colorful outfits, who sing and dance in unison in nearly all of their songs and music videos. In fact, AKB48 is nothing short of a media empire: they have their own magazine, weekly newspaper, several singles a year, a variety show, countless endorsements, and seven sister groups throughout Japan, each with 48 members.

Although the group's domestic popularity has waned in recent years, with a substantial decrease in mainstream media visibility since commencing my fieldwork in 2014 and writing this chapter in 2018, their sales numbers are still impressive: according to Billboard Japan, AKB48 sold the most albums of any J-pop group in 2017 with their release *Thumbnail,* and had the two best-selling singles of the same year ("Negaimoto no Mochigusare," and "Shoot Sign,"

respectively).[139] What's more, private media empire remains a staple in convenience and book stores around the country. They have even found international popularity in Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, where sister groups -- notably JKT48 of Jakarta, MNL48 of Manila, and SNH48 of Shanghai – have spawned.

Geographically mind-boggling statistics aside, the girls create a single alternate universe, where none of the problems facing contemporary (Japanese) society exist. And while their lyrics sometimes traverse deeper territories of *shitsuren* 失恋 (heartbreak, love lost) or unrequited love, their songs usually neatly conclude with messages of happily ever after, or of the importance to *ganbaru* がんばる (try one's best, to put one's best foot forward amidst difficult circumstances). Essentially, the girls AKB48 are here to let the listener know that everything's just fine.

AKB48's culture of production and consumption however, reflects a different reality. Based on research, interviews, and extensive experiences observing and participating in various AKB48 fan activities, in this section I argue that this group's media empire reflects the Japanese government's increased subservience to the private sector, and ultimately operates as a Foucauldian disciplining mechanism within contemporary Japanese society. By examining the hierarchies, group-minded solidarity, and optimistic depictions of work life presented in the world of AKB48 create an idealized simulacrum of Japan, I aim to show that AKB48 fandom is equated with model citizenry and allegiance to the state. By looking closely AKB48's fan culture,

[139] See: https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/international/7866031/akb48-arashi-physical-sales-soundscan-japan-2017-chart

I hope to challenge the problematic idea that the consumer creates popular culture aesthetic, while revealing three more aesthetic examples of capitalism: state-serving discipline.

Koi Suru Fortune Cookie and the Aesthetics of State Interest

The Japan Times published an interview a few years ago about the lifestyle of a typical salaryman: in this case, a 41-year old engineer living on the outskirts of Tokyo. Commenting on the mundanities and perceived hopelessness of his routine, he explains: "Here's the source of my anxiety: I'm *daijōbu* (大丈夫, all right) with the fact that I will probably be family-less for the rest of my life, along with 60-plus percent of Japanese males… [but] it's too late now to change. I must continue to be the single *sarariiman*, staring at my phone to avoid noticing any elderly or disabled people in need of my seat on the train."[140] Bleak though this portrait may sound, his story is apparently typical for the average salaryman. Beyond statistics like the rate of *hitorigurashi* 一人暮らし, or single living, any observer – anthropologist or tourist – can easily detect this quiet malaise in the train stations packed so full with suited businessmen, most of whom will be staring down at their phones, that special workers are employed in Tokyo train stations to push people into packed trains during rush hour. Although to a lesser degree outside the so-called Concrete Jungle, a similar atmosphere can be found in business centers in major cities across Japan, such as Osaka, Nagoya, and even Kyoto.

Taking a look at a typical AKB48 music video, however, provides the listener-viewer with starkly different portrayal of life in Japan. There are salarymen in suits, to be sure, but they seem to be enjoying their work and are able to smile, relax, and unwind when a member (or

[140] Kaori Shoji, "Ain't No Cure for the Salaryman Blues," *The Japan Times*, July 20, 2015.

ten) approaches them, smiling and dancing. In the music video for the 2013 smash hit *Koi Suru Fortune Cookie*, they even join in on the fun, laughing and dancing along with the girls. And it's not just salarymen – members from all swaths of society are shown dancing with the members of AKB48, including old ladies shopping in the supermarket, fishermen, cosmopolitan young parents, and even foreigners. Throughout the video, the girls are seen cheering up the atmosphere in settings recognizable to any Japanese (or people who have spent time in Japan), such as the Shibuya crossing intersection in Tokyo, *shotengai* shopping arcades lined with mom-and-pop shops, the inside of a *conbini* convenience store, and – of course – an office.

Fig. 11: AKB48 teaching Japanese society the steps to bliss in Koi Suru Fortune Cookie.

In *Koi Suru Fortune Cookie*, AKB48 are symbolized as a cure-all for any malaise ailing any person in Japan, from fisherman to salarymen—and when they come your way, you apparently can't help but smile and forget that "life's gettin' you down." While this message is benign enough, there is an implicit, darker theme: that life in Japan *is* difficult. For some, known as *hikikomori,* it's too much to even participate in society. Journalist Michael Zielenzinger's coverage of the *hikikomori* phenomenon points out that that the societally approved life path of becoming a salaryman –the prototypical "productive member of society" since the postwar high growth period – simply does not appeal to a generation of young people who are

disillusioned with intensive work demands, crumbling family life, and a ceaseless economic recession. He explains:

> The collapse of the traditional *ie*… combined with the persistent economic downturn of the past decade, has left today's young adults increasingly alienated and rootless… They no longer yearn to wear dark blue suits and live out their lives as a stable *saraiiman* and seem increasingly alienated from the rigid composition of Japan Inc., the highly organized system that distributes power among corporations, the powerful bureaucracy, and the politicians.[141] But they remain unable to envision new alternatives even as they seek to assert more individual autonomy.[142]

Although dropping out of society altogether is not exactly an ideal alternative, the pressure that Japan's group-minded society exerts on young people to join the workforce is extremely pervasive. Commenting on this pressure, Zielenziger points out: "It's no accident that a Japanese first associates himself with his company or group affiliation before giving his family name… without business cards and titles, how can strangers determine which person is senior and therefore demands greater respect and a deeper bow? Without some association to an institution – a company, a university, the family – who exactly *is* a person?"[143] The social, economic, and even existential crises of opting out of the societally approved life path, then, can be too daunting for many to consider; indeed, much of the homeless population in Japan is said to be comprised of salarymen who lost their jobs, but did not want to bring shame upon their families and other members of their inner circles by admitting their joblessness.[144]

Yet in spite of working conditions that clearly compete with basic humanity (at least on some level), the Japanese state – which I was informed by a member of METI is "frankly,

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[141] Japan Inc, according to Anne Allison, can also be understood as the corporatization of social economy and the "'marriage' between the social factory at home and the postindustrial factory at work that fueled [postwar Japan's] off-the-charts productivity." (Allison, *Precarious Japan,* 21.)
[142] Zielenziger, *Shutting Out the Sun*, 69.
[143] Ibid, 62.
[144] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XlM8hb_O7Dw

broke"[145] – relies on the labor of salarymen, who form the backbone of Japan's struggling economy. Important to note is that Japan's group-minded socio-cultural value system not only exerts pressure for people to become salarymen, but also greatly influences the work/life imbalance that makes life as a salaryman so challenging in the first place: long work hours (*zangyou* 残業) – including on weekends and holidays -- that are often under- or un-compensated, tacitly mandatory after-work social functions (such as *nomikai* 飲み会 drinking parties or *enkai* 宴会 banquets), and taking personal time (*nenkyuu* 年休) when ill rather than designated sick leave (*byoukyuu* 病休) to show humility to, and respect for the time of, the company.[146] If the salaryman rejected these conditions, Japan's entire economic infrastructure would crumble at the foundation and be at risk for utter collapse.

The state, then, has incentives to keep the working class from revolting, and to maintain control over the population in a manner that Michel Foucault has conceived as discipline. As a coercive, top-down force, discipline "arranges a positive economy" over its subjects, and "[poses] the principle of a theoretically ever-growing use of time: exhaustion rather than use; it is a question of extracting, from time, ever more available moments and, from each moment,

[145] Anonymous (Ministry of Education, Trade, and Industry), interviewed by Jillian Marshall, Tokyo, Japan, March 2015.

[146] A good friend of mine works as a translator at a major company in Tokyo. For her first few months, she left work at the end of the workday at 5:00pm. While her productivity was (and is) higher than perhaps any of her colleagues, her boss arranged a meeting with her to discuss her work habits. She was informed that her productivity was, in fact, exceptional, but that leaving at 5:00pm – even if she had completed more work than any of her colleagues in the course of the day – could be perceived as rude. My friend pointed out that she felt she was contributing as much mental labor as she could to her work in the course of the day, to which her boss agreed – and suggested as a compromise that she work *less hard* in the course of a day so as to produce the same amount while leaving at least an hour later than 5:00pm to "appease her superiors."

ever more useful forces."[147] Discipline is ultimately manifested in self-surveillance, embodied by the panopticon and its immense scale of control. Foucault explains: "[Panoptical control] implies an uninterrupted, constant coercion, supervising the processes of the activity rather than its result and it is exercised according to a codification that partitions as closely as possible time, space, and movement."[148] Evidence of discipline in the working conditions and pressures facing salarymen is obvious: individuals feel pressure to participate in society as a salaryman, wherein their time is utterly exhausted by work-related functions that upset work/life balance. All the same, opting out of the system is perceived as too risky, with threats of a vague yet terrifying punishment constantly looming overhead.

As discussed, the Japanese government is economically and politically invested in the monetary success of the domestic pop culture industry, and has consulted with some of its kingpins to learn about money-making strategies.[149] Among these is to first identify a potential audience, and then produce artists or groups who can best appeal to it to maximize sales—and therefore profit for the government. Anthropologist Hiroshi Aoyagi explores this aspect of popular music production culture in his article "Pop Idols and Gender Contestation," and conducted interviews with both producers and up-and-coming idols for his research. He found that, "[f]rom the perspective of the Japanese entertainment industry, a consumer society is composed of *taishu*, or aggregates of consumer groups to which commodities are sold. Some of my informants in the industry referred to their activities as 'mass control' (*taishu sosa*), whose

[147] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage, 1991. P 154.
[148] Ibid, 137.
[149] Anonymous (Ministry of Education, Trade, and Industry), interviewed by Jillian Marshall, Tokyo, Japan, March 2015.

goal is to mold consumers' desires through stylish images and narratives."[150] Pop culture markets, then, are not only tapped, but are created and even manipulated to maximize profits.

The lyrics, sound, and imagery of *Koi Suru Fortune Cookie* and its music video make it clear that the *taishu* target audience of AKB48 is the salaryman. My extensive experiences following the group's fan culture for a year, including seeing the group live, confirm that this is overwhelmingly the case. In fact, when I saw AKB48 live, there was only one other woman in the entire audience surrounded by a sea of howling, cat-calling salarymen. This underscores Aoyagi's assertion that idols like AKB48 are valued by fans as "'quasi-companions' (*gijiteki nakama*), who provide their followers with a virtual sense of intimacy, a feeling that affirms a cultural emphasis on interconnectedness in Japan."[151]

Indeed, fostering a sense of intimacy with fans is foundational to the very inception of AKB48. The group was conceived by producer J-pop producer Akimoto Yasushi – the creator, producer, lyricist, creative director, and marketing mastermind behind AKB48 -- as a "democratic experiment" that would bridge the gap between idols and their fans. Debuted in 2005 under the tagline "idols you can touch perform daily at their very own eponymous theater (right next door to the AKB48 Café and Gift Shop) in the Akihabara neighborhood of Tokyo for which the group is named. The idea is that listeners can participate in the composition of the group: the members are annually rotated, and fans determine the top-ranking members (who nab vocal solos in songs and starring roles in videos) in an annual election, the results of which are featured in the AKB48 magazine with the crowned winner as cover girl. Fans vote by buying

[150] Hiroshi Aoyagi, "Pop Idols and Gender Contestation," in *Japan at the Millennium: Joining Past and Future*, ed. David W. Edgington (Vancouver, Toronto: University of British Columbia Press, 2003), 145.
[151] Ibid, 151.

special CDs released by their favorite members; democratic though this may seem, an article published by CNN points out that some fans "spend thousands of dollars, sometimes hundreds of thousands, to ensure their favorite wins."[152]

Given the reach and profitability of AKB48's media empire, Akimoto is widely considered to be a "marketing genius" as a result. As for AKB48's direct relationship to the state, and role in disciplining the Japanese working class? Although Akimoto has become notoriously private since debuting AKB48 and no information about his personal connection with the Cool Japan or Japan Brand campaigns has been explicitly verified, AKB48 are currently slated to represent Japan as the headlining musical act for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.[153] That, and AKB48 members have also appeared in government and military recruitment videos.[154] So as these young women coo about everything turning out all right, and the hip American DJ tells you the same even if you're feeling hopeless and overworked, the message AKB48 sends is that there isn't any *real* reason to be down. You've just got a case of the blues, along with your fellow countrymen who all know how you feel. All of those problems are made-up anyway, and can be soothed with AKB48 – and the consumption of any of their media, the profits of which go to the state.

Interlude: The AKB48 Pachinko Parlor as Enacted Discipline

[152] See https://www.cnn.com/2017/06/15/asia/akb48-jpop-election/index.html
[153] Anonymous (Ministry of Education, Trade, and Industry), interviewed by Jillian Marshall, Tokyo, Japan, March 2015.
[154] See: https://www.cnn.com/2017/06/15/asia/akb48-jpop-election/index.html

In his ethnography of corporate music culture, Keith Negus has argued that "production does not take place simply 'within' a corporate environment structured according to the requirements of capitalist production or organization formulae, but in relation to broader culture formations and practices that are within neither the control nor understanding of the company."[155] The underground-gone-mainstream trajectory of hip-hop label Death Row Records is perhaps his most convincing case study. Commenting on hip-hop's origins as a reconstitutive art form that gives power back to listeners through appropriative consumptive activities of DJ-ing, sampling, re-mixing, and free-styling over records, he writes: "The creation of rap has… highlighted the tangible connecting points that link the often inadequate concepts of 'production' and 'consumption', and has illustrated how consumption can *become* production."[156]

Yet while this may be true for hip-hop, which came about amidst a particular set of circumstances in a society that (at least superficially) encourages individual expression, a group-oriented society such as Japan might not resist the corporate influence in popular music in the same way – or perhaps at all, as "popular music" has different social import in different societies. It is also worth noting other consumption cultures for popular musics in the United States – such as the fan collectives previously discussed– place a high emphasis on group-mindedness in spite of America's "individualistic" culture. Returning the discussion to Japan and the place for personal expression in both the production and consumption of popular music, Carolyn Stevens has pointed out that, "[while] popular music in the US is usually aligned with

[155] Keith Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*. New York and London: Routledge, 1999, p. 19.
[156] Ibid, 83.

ideas of individualism or resistance, pop music in Japan remains neutral."[157] Although popular music in Japan has aligned itself with resistance movements -- notably the folk music boom in the late 1960s accompanying the Student Movement and Sakamoto Ryuichi's "No Nukes" music festival following the 3/11 disasters -- these efforts used music to gather people around a cause or shared feeling, rather than utilizing musical aesthetic *itself* to communicate these feelings.[158]

AKB48's fan culture is centered on consumption to an extreme degree, since AKB48 is not a single group. It is, in fact, five musical "teams" – the A, K, B, 4, and 8 teams, respectively -- each with forty-eight members and, as mentioned, they have their own variety show, video broadcasts of a daily performance from one of the teams, a weekly newspaper, a magazine, and even a cellphone application. As a group with over two hundred members – not including the two hundred plus members from each sister group -- AKB48 is the ultimate breeding ground for idols in Japan. Idols are also known for their media intertextuality; the more successful AKB48 alumni go on to work as actors, models, talk show hosts, and commercial spokespeople.[159] The formats through which one can consume AKB48 are incomparably large –

[157] Stevens, *Japanese Popular Music*, 64.

[158] The Japanese Folk Music boom, in particular, demonstrates the different connotations that a singular aesthetic can hold across different societies. Folk music culture in the United States, which gained popularity in the early 1960s through musicians such as Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, created a sense of intimacy between musicians and performers with acoustic instruments performed at small venues like coffee shops; the aesthetic was deeply rooted in its place of origin (New York City). By the time this music became more widely known in Japan later in the decade, the aesthetic had come to be associated with the ideals of the folk movement, but was fundamentally detached from the connection between instrumentation and place that cultivated intimacy in this music culture in the first place. As a result, folk music in Japan could serve as an effective means to gather individuals around a shared cause, but the music *itself* was representative of a different time and place altogether. This relationship also belies what Stevens has identified as "the delicate tension between the two interpretive spheres of 'politicized' and 'neutralized' with reference to the Japan-US relationship" (which was explored through the discussion of *Suiyoubi no Campanella*).

[159] Stevens, *Japanese Popular Music*, 50.

and, much to my shock when seeing AKB48 live in Tokyo in 2015, the fans seem intimately familiar with them all.

One of the most striking forms of AKB48 consumption is the AKB48 pachinko parlor, of which there are 72 in Japan.[160] For background, pachinko is a quasi-illegal game somewhere between a slot machine and pinball wherein one tries to get tiny balls into special holes.[161] This is very difficult to do, and most of the machines are rigged so that balls cannot reasonably get inside the holes, but if enough balls get in then one receives a jackpot – a lot of balls at once – that can be either cashed in or used to keep playing. Pachinko parlors are very noisy, with each machine blasting music, words of encouragement, or cheers of congratulation; they are also brightly lit with the neon lights of the machine and lights overhead, and the air usually filled with cigarette smoke. Needless to say, the entire experience of visiting a pachinko parlor is over-stimulating, but for many it becomes a crippling addiction: some people spend most of their free time and money there.[162]

AKB48 pachinko parlors are like a regular pachinko parlor, except AKB48-themed: the music blasting from the machines are selections from their top hits, digital facades of famous members pop up on the screen to cheer you on, and so forth. In 2015, I visited an AKB48 pachinko parlor in Tokyo, which also marked my first time ever playing the game. Like seeing the girls live, I was the only woman in the parlor (save for a female friend who, curious about this research, joined me): the rest of the clientele were salarymen, dressed in suits, many of

[160] See: https://www.p-world.co.jp/machine/database/6805

[161] Pachinko is technically illegal in Japan, but – like prostitution -- authorities turn the other cheek due to its mind-boggling ubiquity and unsavory connections with the *yakuza* mafia.

[162] An acquaintance shared an anecdote once about how his friend routinely spend the last of his paycheck on pachinko, rather than more immediate needs such as groceries.

whom seemed to have come here on their lunch break. Also similar to my experience seeing the girls live, no one was talking with each other or looking at each other – although the former is nearly impossible to do in any pachinko parlor due to the noise. Every day across Japan, people like the men I saw that day pour their time and money into machinated representations of their favorite idols, feeding what is undoubtedly an addiction or obsession.

The AKB48 pachinko parlor is a prime example of how Foucauldian discipline is embodied and manifested in the group's fan culture. "Discipline," explains Foucault,

> … requires enclosure, the specification of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself… [it] produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economy terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns it into an 'aptitude' a 'capacity', which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection. If economic exploitation separates the force and the product of labour, let us say that disciplinary coercion establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination.[163]

In the pachinko parlor – a heterogeneous place closed in upon itself, to be sure – the body is enclosed, subjected, and made docile through the pressures of consumer society, for which pachinko serves as a kind of metaphor. Furthermore, the long commute, long work hours, under-compensation, and mandatory social functions of the typical salaryman dissociates power from the his body, which has increasingly become an instrument of utility; at the same time, rebelling from the system entirely would require too much effort or risk, and so it is a better option to remain obedient while finding relief outside the body. In the pachinko parlor, the salaryman's docile body is, paradoxically, the site of his relief: the head rush from the

[163] Stevens, *Japanese Popular Music*, 154.

cigarette smoke, the rush of endorphins when your ball makes in into the special slot, the flashing lights and loud music to drown out your thoughts and senses, the gambling, the hopes…

Surely Keith Negus would concede that such consumption has no influence on Akimoto Yasushi's vision or the power of its scope, now deeply enmeshed with Japan's economic future.

Aesthetics of Discipline Within AKB48

As shown, the Japanese state's relationship with the pop music industry exerts a disciplining force onto AKB48's target audience of the middle class, embodied by the prototypical salaryman worker. A principle consequence of this is that fandom has become conflated with model citizenry. But what about the members of AKB48, who – as the very products themselves -- exist outside the disciplining hierarchy where consumers occupy the bottom rung? In this last section, I argue that members of AKB48 are also subjected to disciplining forces, perhaps even more so than the salaryman. In addition to being subjected to strict control to prepare for performances, the members of AKB48 are subject to discipline through the auxiliary mechanism of surveillance, both within the AKB48 system and through their constant subjection to media scrutiny operating from the Male Gaze. Foucault's depiction of the panoptical controlling mechanism of surveillance as "a decisive economic operator both as an internal part of the production machinery and as a specific mechanism in the disciplinary power"[164] ultimately keeps its subjects – in this case, the members of AKB48 -- obedient to their designated roles. For the girls, this role is to embody an idealized version of Japanese societal values, particularly with regard to hierarchically delineated group-mindedness and gender

[164] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 175.

roles, to ensure that their target audience can continue equating consumption of AKB48 media with model citizenry.

Discipline, as a mechanism that controls the body through external and internal forces organizes the very structure of the AKB48 system. For one, the bodies of AKB48 members are quite obviously externally controlled, requiring members to train in the AKB48 School and work their way up under grueling schedules through five ranked teams, ranked from elite to novice: the A, K, B, 4, and 8 teams, respectively. Girls in the A team are older as a result, hovering around 18 to 25 years old, but girls on the 8 team are mostly high school-aged, sometimes as young as 13.[165] The AKB48 documentary released in 2012 explains that, because the group routinely performs over 500 songs, the girls must constantly practice singing and dancing in their tight schedules that must often balance AKB48 and high school responsibilities.[166] Indeed, Foucault reminds us that discipline "poses the principle of a theoretically ever-growing use of time: exhaustion rather than use; it is a question of extracting, from time, ever more available moments and, from each moment, ever more useful forces."[167] What's more, the group's so-called "democratic" organizational principle is also externally controlled: the coveted top member positions -- which provide more face time in music videos and a full interview and photo spread in the AKB48 magazine -- are determined by fans, who vote in the annual AKB48 election that determines these positions and, ultimately, the fate of these young women's careers.[168]

[165] This was the age of the youngest group member that I found in the 2015 AKB48 magazine; meanwhile, the average age of sister group HKT48 of Fukuoka, Japan, boasts an average member age of 13.9 years old.
[166] *Show Must Go On: The AKB48 Documentary,* dir. Takahashi Eiki. Toho Entertainment, 2012.
[167] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 154.
[168] *Show Must Go ON: The AKB48 Documentary,*

The group's rigorous training schedule also disciplines the members. Backstage shots in AKB48 documentary reveal that members often physical break down after or even during performances; several girls were shown collapsing, and asthma attacks are apparently so commonplace that cans of oxygen are readily available at all times.[169] Additionally, members have no control over the aesthetic of the music or dance they perform, other than the minimal input offered by a fan-elected team leader; such decisions are instead made entirely by Akimoto Yasushi and his team of producers. The result is that AKB48 songs and music videos heavily utilize the trope of unison: singing the melody in synch and wearing matching schoolgirl outfits, the members rarely harmonize, and dances are similarly uniform. In addition to belying that the aesthetic of this group does not prioritize creative talents – otherwise, they would be showcased – the trope of unison creates the illusion of harmony within the group, despite the rigid schedules, feelings of competition, hierarchies, total lack of input, replaceability, and loss of autonomy over their bodies. Essentially, the girls are performing obedience to the AKB48 system, and the social values on which it is built.[170]

Fig. 12: Unison in 2010's Heavy Rotation *and 2013's* Koi Suru Fortune Cookie.

[169] AKB48 DOCUMENTARY

[170] That the girls collapse backstage during performances was not depicted as a point of concern in the documentary; rather, it was shown as an honorable display of their hard work and dedication to AKB48.

Yet this obedience extends beyond representation; instead, it seems to be fully embodied by AKB48 members. In the annual elections that determine the top members, speeches given by the top-voted AKB48 members and their subsequently published interviews in the AKB48 magazine reveal an intense allegiance to the AKB48 system, as well as the demanding standards to which they're held. For instance, the AKB48 Documentary shows a live taping of the 2012 election wherein top member winner Maeda Atsuko has a rather surprising reaction. Breaking down in sobs, she bows deeply to the audience before taking the stage to give her speech. Accepting the title, she does not say thank you and instead *apologizes* before her closing statement: "I know there are many of you who probably hate me, but I have one request—even if you do hate me, please, don't hate AKB48!"[171] Even while winning the ultimate title – explicitly outlined in the very title of the AKB48 documentary as the dream of every member[172] -- she shows her subservience to the group, accepting the top slot only as a course of duty. In fact, I had to watch her speech three times before finally understanding that she hadn't done something wrong, but had actually *won*.

Her speech -- met with roaring applause -- demonstrates, in addition to embodied obedience, the extent to which Japanese societal values define the world of AKB48. Unrelenting commitment to the group to the point of renouncing individual hard work, happily singing and dancing in unison with others, wholly accepting the powers that be without questioning if there's another way (仕方がない *shikata ga nai,* nothing can be done), humility, smiling and

[171]「私のことが嫌いな方がいると思います。でも、一つだけのお願いがあります。私のことが嫌いでも、AKB48 のことを嫌いにならないで下さい！！」AKB48 DOCUMENTARY

[172]「少女たちは傷つきながら、夢を見る」, or "Young girls [with connotations of virginity] looking toward their dream while [enduring] wounds" – itself evincing of discipline within the AKB48 system.

moving through immensely challenging circumstances with a *ganbare!* (as noted, to try one's best in the face of difficult circumstances) attitude: these are the core social values that make up the fabric of Japanese society. This, too, is evinced by Maeda Atsuko's acceptance speech.

As idols, AKB48 enact a fantasy of utopian Japanese social relations by upholding these social values; as humans, they face immense pressure from being under the constant surveillance of media scrutiny. Because surveillance, according to Foucault, "[induces] in the inmate [of panoptical conditions] a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the *automatic functioning of power*,"[173] the girls must remain obedient to these superhuman duties lest they face punishment in the form of scandal, which media studies scholar John B. Thompson defines as "[involving the] transgression of certain values, norms, or moral codes; disapproval and being offended; public denunciation; disclosure and condemnation of actions; damage of reputation of individuals responsible for [the scandal] or involved parties."[174] Indeed, a major scandal broke out in 2013 when an AKB48 member was discovered leaving a man's house, thereby transgressing one of the major taboos of idolhood: dating. After crudely shaving her head – a deeply symbolic act of acknowledging one's shame -- she attempted to rectify the shame she felt she had brought to the AKB48 name by uploading a video of herself apologizing and mercilessly putting herself down through nearly incomprehensible sobs.[175]

[173] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish,* 201.
[174] John B. Thompson, "Scandal and Social Theory," in *Media Scandal: Morality and Desire in the Popular Culture Marketplace,* eds. James Lull and Stephen Hinerman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

Fig. 13: Apology Video.[176]

What this evinces is not only the effects of surveillance on the psyche of these idols, but the extent to which the AKB48 members – as women – are doubly subject to disciplining forces. As pawns in Akimoto's masterful playing of the pop music industry, AKB48 was crafted to appeal to the target audience salarymen, and their aesthetic thus strongly panders to the Male Gaze. As discussed in the section on *Suiyoubi no Campanella*, pornographized imagery of women according to the Male Gaze is a staple of the pop music industry, wherein women are pressured to strip down to secure their relevance. While representations of sexuality in AKB48's aesthetic appears less revealing on the surface, it is perhaps more objectifying in that it panders to the *rorikon* ("Lolita complex") standard of femininity prevalent in Japan. On the appeal of *shojo,* or virginal young women that are targeted by *rorikon*, anthropologist Christine Yano writes:

> The real or fictive nature of the sex-child image matters less than her public circulation as a symbolic dream girl, at least for some men. It also lies in the purported fleetingness of the condition, as all too soon the child becomes an adult. The attraction, then, at least for her pedophilic admirers, is not for the woman but for the child. And it is *as child* that she becomes precious as a transitory figure threatened by impending adulthood… the simultaneous presence of both these versions of the shojo – girl-child and sex-child

[176] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oP_g3LYUQOw&t=31s

> – creates some of the pubic tension and ambiguity surrounding what has become a sometimes controversial icon. Both versions draw on that most public of shojo symbols – the school-girl uniform, of which the most iconic is the navy blue sailor style… the shojo is a child whose eroticism rests in adult male desire for prepubescent females.[177]

The girls of AKB48 fulfill the *shojo* fantasy to a T, prancing around stage and in music videos in school-girl uniforms and high heels. The music video for the smash 2010 hit *Heavy Rotation* sees the girls in their uniforms, to be sure, but only during the chorus and bridge; the rest of the time, they are dressed in sexy black, pink, white, and red lingere. Performing the tension between girl-child and sex-child described by Yano, the girls also adorn headbands with fluffy cat ears, playfully toss pillows at one another, feed each other heart-shaped sweets, and roll around, giggling, in a pink bedroom. Enacting the classic Male Gaze fantasy of catching a glimpse into a homoerotically charged girls' sleepover, the camera peeks into the bedroom's peephole at the start of the music video; in scenes where the girls where uniforms, it coyly peeks up their short and bouncy skirts to portray the girls sexually, but not so explicitly as to appear overtly lude or shocking. In *Heavy Rotation* as in other videos and performances, the girls of AKB48 are doubly disciplined through the Male Gaze: not only are they portrayed as subordinate sex objects for their target audience of salarymen, the portrayal of their sexuality is plays into what is, in reality, a societally accepted rape fantasy.

Conclusion: Socio-Cultural Reverberations

Although my experience seeing the group live, as well as an examination of the AKB48 documentary or a taping of any live performance, quickly reveals that the audience is mostly comprised of high-school to middle-aged men, shouting, hollering and waving banners and

[177] Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 51.

uchiwa paper fans emblazoned with their favorite member's faces, the group does have some female fans – mostly elementary or middle school girls. What sort of effect does the AKB48 aesthetic have on these audiences? Roland Kelts has argued that Japanese pop culture, which explores rape fantasy in manga, anime, and video games as well, is harmless freedom of expression. In *Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture has Invaded the U.S.,* he writes:

> On one level… Japan worships the freedom of the human imagination and is notably unashamed if that imagination is fully expressed and widely consumed. Adult sex with schoolgirls is illegal in Japan, but an outright denial that the thought ever crosses some people's minds is patently absurd. So long as nobody is being hurt (which they are not, for example, by the existence of a game like RapeLay), Japan is intensely serious about the pursuit of happiness, even without having it mentioned in a formal declaration of independence.[178]

The only issue is, people *are* hurt by these fantasies. Meredith Levande sums up the effects of the pornographization of popular culture with this important observation: "Sex itself is not selling… but rather a buy-into notion that demeaning women's bodies in exchange for profit is acceptable."[179] The young girl fans of AKB48, then, get the explicit message that their worth is only sexual, and that their freedom of sexual expression – which, to be sure, is very important – should be self-consciously crafted by Male Gaze. At the same time, male fans get the more implicit message that they are slaves to adolescent desire – itself shaped by corporate interests -- and that way out is more, more, more.

Epilogue: The Aesthetics of Capitalism

Throughout this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate that categorizing popular music as a genre of music defined by sound and visuals alone limits a potentially rich discussion

[178] Roland Kelts, *Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture has Invaded the U.S* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 133-4.
[179] Levande, "Women, Pop Music, and Pornography," 302.

of aesthetic and broader socio-cultural implications. Indeed, the sound and visuals of *Suiyoubi no Campanella*, Kyary Pamyu Pamyu, and AKB48 have very little in common on the surface, but each demonstrate broader aesthetics of capitalism in popular music: as an industry, as an identity crisis, and as a disciplining mechanism with fascist undertones.

Understanding popular music as simply a reflection of consumer interest is fallacious; indeed, Ian Condry makes this same observation in *Hip-Hop Japan: Rap and the Paths of Globalization*:

> According to [an article in Data Watch Magazine] called 'Are Today's Music Consumers Really 'Music Fans?', the answer is no. The analyst points out that the bulk oo consumption comes from people who rarely go to concerts and who, in general, do not know much about music. For some reason, they made a particular purchase, but their lives revolve only partly around music.[180]

This fact also rejects Negus' erroneous claim that consumers shape industry.Because, in actuality, sales demonstrate the extent to which targeted consumer groups are, cynically but essentially, duped by marketing strategies. This isn't to say that catchy music doesn't have value, but rather to comment on the way that popular music is used (or offered) as an escape, as antidote, as denial to postmodern societal conditions. Indeed, it is this reality which has impacted the urgency with which I argue that we should understand the socio-cultural implications of aesthetic: ultimately, this perspective is what arms us with awareness, and gifts us with the perspective to make more informed choices both as listeners, and as consumer-citizens.

After all, denial not only doesn't counteract the problem, but is itself a symptom of the problem. In his prophetic book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show*

[180] Condry, *Hip-Hop Japan*, 194-5.

Business, Neil Postman suggests that the saturation of media in capitalist society might lead to our own undoing:

> What Aldous Huxley [in *Brave New World*] teaches is that in the age of advanced technology, spiritual devastation is more likely to come from an enemy with a smiling face than from one whose countenance exudes suspicion an hate. In the Huxleyan prophecy, Big Brother does not watch us, by his choice. We watch him, by outs… When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when, in short, a people become an audience and their public business is a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture death is a clear possibility.[181]

In the case of Japanese popular music, the enemy might just come in the form of forty-eight smiling faces, as it were.

But I say this without judgement. Seriously, what does American popular music say about the United States?

[181] Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 155-6.

3/11

For Mom, Dad, and Brooke

It was graduation, a Friday. Beloved students I had seen grow up were now moving on. My students, but also my teachers, the ones who ended up teaching me all the Japanese I knew at the time, who showed me that humanity knows no cultural boundaries -- until socialization firmly settles in, anyway. Writing notes, telling secrets, secretly laughing together and confirming that, no, it's not just me, sometimes things get crazy around here. The lifelines who helped me fall hopelessly in love with Japan.

We took pictures, and shed *setsunai* せつない tears.[182]

Sometime just before three, after most of the students had gone home while the remaining teachers were finalizing last-minute details for the *enkai* 宴会 banquet/drunken festival of debauchery to celebrate the end of another school year that evening, someone happened to turn on the TV in the staff room.

Flames, something about an earthquake up in Tohoku.

But earthquakes happen all time in Japan.

You know, there's nothing quite like an earthquake—the weightlessness, that initial rush of something close to excitement, how small you feel, the admission of mortality, and ultimately

[182] Bittersweet, the feeling of savoring life's inevitabilities.

the humility that comes about when the earth beneath you begins to rock back and forth, bounce up and down.

For someone not enculturated to accept this awesome force of nature from birth, it was difficult to even recognize earthquakes when I first moved to Japan. The thing is, minor earthquakes really do happen all the time, and it's just no big deal. I also supposed for my first few quakes that it was probably a large truck or something passing by that was oddly shaking my entire apartment building. But upon further inspection, there was never any traffic… then I would think that I was imagining things, until the swaying curtains or some other hung object gave it away.

Ohhh… that was an earthquake?

It's an eerie feeling, but also an important reminder that we are all merely human, sharing this earth together.

That, and Japan is a crazy smattering of islands born of volcanoes and fault lines and other mystically powerful life forces straight out of a comic book and its B movie adaptation.

Anyway, there'd been minor quakes up in Tohoku all that week, and news tends to be sensationalized. I, along with the other teachers who left school around the same time as me, didn't think much of it, and so we headed out.

It was graduation, after all, and everyone was in good spirits.

- See you tonight!
- Take care!

- *Otsukaresama desu* お疲れ様です！[183]

By the time I got home a few minutes later, I got some texts from L up in Gunma prefecture, south of the epicenter.

- OH MY GOD, there was a giant earthquake and the entire school was shaking and we were all hiding under our desks!! This is insane!! I've never experienced anything like this in my entire life! This is so terrifying!

Oh… is this like… a real *earthquake?*

- Yes, I'm fine, we're not too close to the epicenter. Yeah, students are fine, school is ok. But oh my god… there's going to be a giant tsunami. Are you OK down on the island?
-

I slowly put the phone down, and gathered my thoughts.

A natural disaster?

I picked up the phone, and dialed another dear friend living closer to the epicenter to see if she was OK. No answer, no dial tone. All cell service is blocked up, no calls can get through.

I tried again, just in case—no go.

She's OK. It's all OK. You're going to be OK.

Then, a siren I've never heard before began to wail with an eerie Doppler Effect.[184] A van with loudspeakers attached to its roof was driving around town, announcing:

- This is a tsunami warning. Seek higher ground immediately.

[183] "Thanks for all the hard work you put in today!"
[184] For those who don't obsessively mentally catalog factoids from middle school science class, the Doppler Effect is characterized by the change in tone in a wailing siren, which bends at a slower frequency and pitch the further away it gets.

Although the town where I lived was far away from the earthquake, it is situated at the very bottom of an island where the Seto Inland Sea meets the open Pacific, and is thus very susceptible to tsunamis, destructive typhoons, and other sea-related disasters.

The wave was anticipated at no more than a meter high, so I hopped in my car to reach a point on higher ground where I might be able to see it come to shore. Afraid though I was, I was also deeply curious.

We don't have tsunamis where I'm from.

My phone rings. It's school. The party tonight is cancelled. It would be inappropriate to celebrate.

Waiting to see the tsunami roll in with literal morbid fascination, my phone rings again, this time from an unlisted number. This signaled an international call.

It was mom.

- Honey, are you OK? I woke up in the night and just had an inkling to turn on the television, and saw something about a huge earthquake. Where are you? Are you OK?
-

I think so?

After watching the sea for a while, totally blank but attempting to collect my thoughts and feelings, I drove to the middle of the island away from any place with a tsunami warning to meet up with some of the other foreign teacher friends. We were all equally unsure of what

exactly was happening, what we were feeling, how we *should* be feeling, and what came next.

We had no idea what would unfold.

How would you respond to the uncertainty of this magnitude of natural disaster, especially

when you've never experienced anything like it before in your life?

We got takeout from McDonald's.

--

- WHERE ARE YOU. Are you near the epicenter? Are you anywhere near Fukushima? Was there any damage where you live? Are you OK?
- Important message for all US citizens living in Japan: the United Kingdom and Australia have strongly encouraged foreign nationals to return to their home countries. We will continue to update you regarding evacuation mandates and procedures as necessary.
- Jillian, everyone has been asking about you. It looks really bad over there. Are you OK? COME HOME.

But… I am *home…*

- Thank you everyone for reaching out. I'm safe. Let's keep Japan in our thoughts, and learn an important lesson about the dangers of nuclear power.
- Hi everyone, thanks for the countless messages and concern. She's safe, she went to higher ground for the tsunami and her island isn't affected. Continue to wish her and everyone in Japan well. I'll keep you updated.
- I know this message is out of the blue, but when I found out you were in Japan I had to reach out. Is everything OK? Are you safe?

I don't know.

- Just remember, the info that the Japanese press is feeding you is not necessarily the truth, and when the truth comes out, it will be too late. If the US Navy is moving its fleet because of fallout, then it is time to go. Don't wait till you are not allowed to leave. This is really bad, and apparently you don't understand how bad. I'm not lying to you, just really worried. Please Honey get the hell out as soon as possible. love Dad[185]

But I can't just up and leave…

[185] Email, 3/15/11

- I find it hard to believe that the outfit that you work for in the US hasn't called all of you back. Unless you have a lead suit that you wear constantly, you are going to be exposed to severe doses of a deadly poison that has no antidote. I know how strong you are, how much you wanted to do this asian gig (sic) and how well you have done it. I am sure that every one of those kids will never forget you and the teachers will wish the next guy (sic) was as dedicated as you were. The school year has ended, wouldn't it be a good time to go. love Dad[186]

I DON'T KNOW.

--

School on Monday. The kids seem slightly concerned but still *genki* 元気[187] as ever, and all the teachers are freaking out. Someone leaves the TV on in the staffroom.

Oh my god... the nuclear plant is exploding.

The chimes ring, time for class.

I look around to see how I should be acting, to just do what the others are doing and spare them the dreadfully embarrassing task of telling the bumbling, clueless gaijin what to do.[188]

[186] Email, 3/16/11
[187] Full of energy, healthy, feeling fine
[188] Notably alerting them to any sort of group meeting. "Oh, we didn't want to bother you!"

Apparently, we're putting on happy faces to go teach the children as if the worst nuclear accident since Chernobyl isn't unfolding by the minute.

But how are we supposed to just pretend? Are we really just leaving the kids in the dark? Is this… kind of fucked up, or am I just being American about this?

Who are we keeping in denial?

--

The convenience stores are all empty. Not because people are stealing or looting or panicking or blaming or scapegoating or demonstrating or rioting or burning or yelling or crying or throwing rocks or shaming or breaking in or unleashing generations of the unfathomable heartbreak of racialized, marginalized, traumatic rage.

We're not in Louisiana anymore, Toto.

People are buying and sending supplies to Tohoku, even if they don't know anyone there.

--

School on Wednesday. It's the little school with 20 kids, and they only need me once a week. I haven't seen my coworkers since before the disasters.

- Tacchan's family is from Fukushima. His aunts and cousins are all up there. They're OK, but no one knows where they're going to go, if they're going to stay…
- Where would they even go? Are they living within in the evacuation radius?
- The plant is still on fire, but the news says everything's ok. What makes something technically a 'meltdown'?

- It's bad, but they're sending people in there. They're going to use sea water to cool the reactors.
- But it's a suicide mission. No one's going to volunteer for that.
- Isn't sea water a last-ditch effort? What if it doesn't work?

The staffroom is tense. Everyone is worried, scared. It's so much to process, and things are getting worse by the day.

I am silent the whole time, just listening, observing, and running a similar inner script in my head, equally panicked but with a slightly different perspective:

What's really going on, here? According to the news everything's just fine, it's peachy and we're at work pretending everything's A-OK, business as usual. But shit is literally exploding every day, no one knows what to do, and the tsunamis are like out of a disaster movie. Are we really supposed to just wait this out?

Over in America they think it's, like, the nuclear apocalypse and that giant waves of death water are overflowing into all parts of Japan. And it's sort of true, although the exotic fear factor of earthquakes gets super played up in the American media. CAN SOMEONE TELL ME WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON, HERE? Everyone in the US is trying to be nice by showing that they care, but what do they want me to do, drop my entire life and move back? I have responsibilities here, I have ties… I don't want to leave. Am I totally crazy?

I'm not leaving unless the US government makes me. But for real, sometimes I'm ignored so hard that it's like these people wouldn't even notice if I up and left anyway. Look at this shit… everyone's getting real for the first time and taking care of each other, but I'm still *left out. Am I a human being yet to you people, or am I still just another ignorant American who could never understand Japan or whatever this shit is really about? What would happen if the earthquake were* here? *Would I be left for dead? What do I have to do to prove myself? Am I still just totally on my own here?*

Why can't someone at least acknowledge my presence, my humanity!?

Welp, I got my wish—for the first part, anyway.

The vice principle was troubled, deep in thought. Then she suddenly turned to me. I saw it in her eyes: that Aha! sparkle. Of course! The gaijin— the all-too-necessary comic relief! Just what the room needs to break this awful tension.

But she wouldn't. Not for this. It'd be too far.

In a particularly thick moment of panicked quiet that followed, a silly smile spreads across her face as she shouts:

- Jiru, Jiru!

Oh god no.

She shakes her hands back and forth.

- *Jishin! Jishin!* 地震！地震！[189]

This can't be happening.

Now making wave motions, she explains:

- TsuNAAAAmi! TsuNAAAAAmi! 津波！津波！[190]

…

The following moment of silence was so thick that it would swallow the entire knife whole. It was a blow so low that some of my coworkers actually cringed, even if it was on behalf of the otherwise lowly gaijin pond scum.

I paused, and gathered myself.

- *Wakarimashita. Totemo kowai desu ne.* 分かりました。とても怖いですね。

I had said: "I understand. It's very scary."

What I had wanted to say was:

[189] Earthquake.

[190] As so helpfully indicated by the vice principle, this word is the same in English as it is in Japanese, but with a slightly different pronunciation.

Bitch, you think I don't know that?!!??!!!!??

** Later that day (Coda)**

I asked the math teacher if I could borrow some dice for my class. She huffs.

- Jiru. Do you know about the 100 yen shop? They sell dice. Since you've asked to use mine more than once now, it would be better if you got your own.
-

Do I know what the 100 yen shop is? Fuck me, are you fucking serious. I've been living here almost two fucking years and you really think I haven't figured that one out yet? Is it really that big of a deal that I've asked to borrow your dice twice now? Fuck you for taking this shit out on me, you don't think I'm going through this same shit? You don't think I'm scared too? Fuck you, FUCK you, for not having any empathy toward me whatsoever because I look different, ooooooooooh so scary because I'm not a perfect Japanese person, or whatever the fuck it is that's preventing you from treating me with basic human decency. Fuck, fuck this whole thing, fuck all of you people except the kids[191], fuck this island, fuck Fukushima, fuck nuclear power, fuck Japan, fuck America, fuck me, fuck you, fuck you fuck fuck fuckkkkkkkkkkkkkk

- I'm sorry for causing a nuisance. Thank you for the advice. I'll be sure to get some for the next class.

[191] And a few of the 先生方 *senseigata* teachers.

Amerika the Beautiful, in Two Acts

For Baba

Act I: Ame-mura, Osaka

I venture to say that many of us born and raised in America hold a marked curiosity toward the idea of an America Town. Americans are largely familiar with "towns," notably of the Chinese variety, along with Little Italys, Polish Villages and other enclaves that dot the landscape of a nation-state built by and on the premise of immigrants.[192] While a cynical post-structuralist perspective might see towns as archaeological relics of white normativity – a truly inclusive society would be more integrated, perhaps – another view might posit them as evidence of a live-and-let-live society that realistically illustrates the stark, but liberating possibility that we humans might have racist tendencies by default, and so must actively seek humility to consider alternate racial and socio-cultural realities.[193] Just hop on a train in New York City and get off at a station of your whimsical choosing, and you will likely find yourself in a "town" that feels a world away.[194]

Which all begs the question: what, exactly, is this experiment we call America? Or, perhaps more accurately, *where* is America?

[192] Which hopefully remains in place despite America's current political regime.
[193] This doesn't challenge the post-structuralist perspective, however, except to ask: what's the course of action now that we know that everyone's racist?
[194] For instance, the 8th Avenue Chinatown in Brooklyn, also known as "Little Hong Kong," doesn't look, smell, or feel like "America" at all. Neither does Harlem for the first-time white visitor, who by default will likely have been rendered unexposed to non-white culture for most of her American life.

In Osaka, it's off the Midosuji subway line. Packed in a few grimy blocks tucked away from the neon lights of the Doutonbori arcade, the glitzy shops of Midosuji street, the crowds and sheen of Umeda and Shinsaibashi, the department stores and pachinko parlors of Namba, and the seediness of Soemon-cho lies *Amerika-mura* アメリカ村: Amerika Town, oft shortened to Ame-mura.

There's a distinct feel to Ame-mura that lets you know you've arrived, a certain chaos that somehow feels familiar to someone who grew up with stars and stripes, bald eagles, red, white, and blue, and Uncle Sam. For one, there's garbage on Japan's normally immaculate streets despite not really having public trash receptacles.[195] Signs reminding you to pick up your dog's poop are plastered onto the street lamps, which are curiously shaped like twenty-foot stick-figure humans carrying light orbs. There aren't any public restrooms in the convenience stores.[196] Men holler at you from the street, commenting on your outfit or asking you to come to the club where they work.

People even jay-walk![197]

Clothing stores line the streets, notably the innumerable shops selling t-shirts with American pop stars giving the middle finger and/or smoking weed, caps for American baseball teams with stickers on the brim, gold chains and wayfarer sunglasses, basketball shoes... then

[195] This is largely a security measure implemented after the sarin gas attacks in Tokyo's subways by the Aum cult in 1995.
[196] In fact, this is the only area of Japan I've ever been to where the convenience stores don't offer public restrooms.
[197] That said, traffic lights are strictly obeyed in most of Japan. It could be 3am in the countryside, pitch black and without another human (much less a car) in sight, and people would probably still wait until the little pedestrian figure changes from red to green (not white, like in America).

there are the hippy clothing stores, where everything is loose, made of alpaca wool, and the (Japanese) staff all seem to have dreadlocks. Not to be left out are the shops targeted at night clubbers, selling polyester bodycon dresses bedazzled in pounds[198] of sequins. Oftentimes blaring American Top 40 hits from the entrances, shops are open past normal business hours, operating as late as 10pm. All the same, there's a lot less neon than in the downtown hubs of Doutonbori and Umeda.

You'll see jewelry parlors selling barbells and other piercings that constitute something of a taboo in Japan, where even having pierced earlobes is considered risqué by some standards.[199] In a way, these shops vaguely resemble the "We Buy Gold! Cash on the Spot!" pawn shops lining the streets in New York, Chicago, or other urban American areas, but without that distinct aspect of hustle. We're still in Japan, here—there's a proper way to do things, and everything must have its place. That includes foreigners, white and otherwise,[200] who, while not explicitly banned from pursuing careers other than the eventually soul-sucking dead-end of teaching English,[201] have a hard time finding work in Japan.

[198] Decidedly not kilograms. Hey, this is America Town!

[199] While working in the middle schools, no female teachers wore earrings, nor did any of the students. When asked when I got my ears pierced, my reply – age 7 – shocked students and coworkers alike. In the US, though, even babies get their ears pierced. I venture to say that Claire's Accessories has hosted this unofficial rite-of-passage for countless girls and women in America.

[200] The word for foreigner, "gaijin," connotes white foreigners, particularly Americans, Europeans, and Australians.

[201] Most English teaching gigs are actually assistantships, where native speakers work as Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) under JTEs (Japanese Teachers of English). Because of the Japanese social hierarchy, this means that the ALT must defer to the authority of the JTE, even if the JTE makes English errors. Although there is a way to climb the system – find a way to remain sincere about paying respects, since it really is wonderful just to be in Japan, and find joy in your work – it can be frustrating to work in a decidedly un-meritocratic system.

Basically, Amerika Town a Japanese replica of the idea of America, which is ironically the antithesis of what America is (purportedly) all about. Indeed, Amerika Town is a fabulously insightful portrait of Japan!

Continuing onward, you'll soon find the burger joints. To be fair, restaurants sell burgers all over Japan and it may be a projection to draw such a neat parallel between Ame-mura and other "towns" that boast authentic local fare… but there really do seem to be more burger specialty restaurants concentrated in Ame-mura. Most of these restaurants are Japanese chains, like Mosburger, Bikkuri Donkey (translatable as "Surprise Donkey") and Freshness Burger. And while there is no McDonalds – more of a stable in Japanese suburban areas, surprisingly enough -- there is a location of the rarely seen Burger King in the shopping plaza across from one of Japan's most prominent mock Statues of Liberty, perched atop the roof of a building housing at least three hip-hop lothing stores.[202]

Ah, the sweet familiarity of local American business. Mmm, global capitalism -- the taste of home![203]

In the heart of Ame-mura is its crown jewel: Triangle Park, a three-sided slab of concrete enclaved by two intersecting streets. Triangle Park is where the party starts – or ends,

[202] The other prominent Statue of Liberty can be found on the man-made island/adult amusement park of Odaiba in Tokyo, although there may be more *jiyuu no megami* 自由の女神 nestled throughout the archipelago.

[203] It must be noted that not all of America is infiltrated by fast food joints and strip malls. For instance, where I grew up is the only state without a McDonald's in its capital city, which also happens to be the smallest in the country. Following anthropologist Michael Jackson's conjecture about the natural quality of alien-like inquisitiveness that draws many of us to anthropology in the first place, maybe this is why I've never fully understood "America." Or, inspired by fellow New Englander Walt Whitman's containment of multitudes, maybe America is more than one place, more than one reality—a cultural dodecahedron, unfortunately though necessarily blind to all of its sides.

depending on the level of your pre-game. In any case, it's where people get wasted on the cheap booze readily purchased from nearby convenience stores, while chatting and hanging out. A popular meeting spot, Triangle Park draws an eclectic, rowdy crowd of foreigners looking to party, rebellious Japanese youth living out fantasies of counterculture, and partiers on their way to clubs that blast EDM at top volume. Indeed, much lot of Osaka's nightlife is centered in and around Amerika Town, although some of these spaces – notably Club Lunar[204] -- were shut down due Japan's anti-dance law (lifted in 2014, but reinstated in 2017).

After hitting the club, you can take a one-night souvenir back to one of the many *rabu hoteru* ラブホテル(love hotels) in Ame-mura. "Love" is used loosely here, of course: with names like "Hotel Rose Lips," these sleazy establishments are where you rent a room with a giant mirror on the ceiling and a double king-sized bed by the hour – and aren't about love so much as lust. Take a couple of wrong turns down some inconspicuous alleys and you'll find yourself in front of a string of *so-pu rando* ソープランド(soapland): establishments that take you to the next level of seediness, where men flip through a catalog and pay for the woman of their choosing to wash them, and perform other favors.[205]

But no sex![206] Prostitution is still technically illegal in Japan, although this law seems less strictly enforced than one about dancing was…

[204] Notable for the author, at least, as the space where I heard underground music in Japan for the first time.
[205] Apparently, only Japanese men can patron most soaplands.
[206] There's no way this isn't a bold-face lie.

Overall, there's a rowdiness to Ame-mura, a care-free performativity defined by dreams of what it must be like to live without rules—to be "free." It's an experiment, an escape, a fantasy from the everyday. Because it's not "Japanese," it's therefore seen as where people can let loose, rebel, and go crazy.

So, does Amerika Town feel really like home to a person socialized in the US of A?

Given that Ame-mura superficially glorifies aspects about America that I go to *Japan* to escape, I'd say no -- except for the jay-walking. That's the clincher.

There's just something about darting across the street if there aren't any cars coming – or if I think I can make it – that brings me right back home.

Act II: Kadena Military Base, Okinawa

It was by accident.

The first week of May marks Golden Week – a string of national holidays when everyone in Japan goes on vacation – and L and I decided to go to Okinawa… along with everyone in Japan, it seemed. There were no rooms available in the capital city of Naha so we stayed in Okinawa City, about an hour north. There weren't any hotels available there, either, so we opted for an Airbnb that boasted to be right in the city center, near the local attraction of Koza Music Town.

Wow, a music town? Sounds great!

While the accommodations weren't exactly five star – snails in the outdoor shower, plywood walls, flimsy 100 yen-shop cushions that were advertised as a "complete futon set" on

the website – it was, indeed and luckily, centrally located. We arrived in the evening, and everything was dark—shockingly so.

This is Okinawa's second biggest city… where is everyone? Why are there no businesses or street lights?

Throwing caution to the wind, we decided to venture out for dinner and drinks and found what seemed to be the only 居酒屋 *izakaya* open in town for a delicious meal run by an eerily dignified older Japanese man. His formal dress and classic-style bar and restaurant seemed oddly out of place on the sketchy, unlit road lined with abandoned businesses that appeared to be the main drag in town. Nonetheless, in good spirits after indulging in *goya champuru* ゴ-ヤチャンプルー bitter melon casserole and two rounds of house-made plum wine, we went for a walk to hit the town, get a feel for Okinawa City-- and maybe even check out Koza Music Town.

Strolling back in the direction toward the Airbnb, we noticed another big street that we somehow hadn't noticed on the way to dinner.

Whoa, how did we miss this big drag?

At first we couldn't see where we were, as there were no lights or cars, but soon we both stopped, in dumb-struck awe and horror, when we finally caught a glimpse through the hazy light of a street lamp:

A broad street, much wider than typical Japanese blacktop. Strip clubs. Seedy bars. All-night tattoo parlors. Pawn shops. Flickering lights, but no staff-- and no customers. Each

building more burnt out than the next. A stark, post-apocalyptic, bombed-out feel somewhere between post-alien invasion L.A. in the movie *Independence Day* and a Cormack McCarthy novel.

It was a ghost town: we were uncannily alone.

What is *this terrible place?*

A janked-out Honda with no muffler and a special, non-Japanese license plate marked with a "Y" symbol suddenly careens onto the strip; two American men holler at us through the window.

HEYYY WHERE YOU GOIN'!!!

The car disappears through a gate at the end of the road.

Welcome to Kadena Military Base: the largest American Military Base in Okinawa, and one of the largest in all of Japan.

Horrified, fascinated, we took it all in, laughing uneasily at the names of these places as a kind of coping mechanism: Bar Playaz, Amazonian Strip Club, Last Chance Saloon, Boobies Tattoo Parlor.

A dark, hurried figure approaches us on a bicycle, riding quickly away from the direction of the gate. We freeze. He stops when he sees us and, revealing his status as an ally, offers the following advice (in English) through gasps of breath: "*Don't go in to* any *of these places*."

Don't worry, we won't.

Dumbfounded, we realized:

Is this the America that the rest of the world knows, that only we "Americans" don't?

And for the rest of our time in Okinawa, as we drove past more and more bases and the protesters perpetually outside of them, we came face-to-face with the denial that we realized we had long used to protect ourselves against the intense feelings of shame, anger, despair, and hopelessness that rise to the surface when confronting the United States' international alter ego: Amerika. With a "k" because it's alien yet uncannily familiar, harsh and twisted… this ain't what we've been taught is the land of the free, home of the brave.

Seriously. Doesn't history tell us that America *saved* Japan from militaristic fascism?

Worth noting is that the majority of the most horrific crimes in Okinawa are committed by American military personnel.[207]

And that there are American military bases in over 70 countries on this planet.[208]

Yes, Amerika the beautiful… from sea to shining sea.

Oh, and it turns out Koza Music Town is a defunct musical instrument shop in an abandoned shopping complex, next to a strip club.

[207] Notably rape and murder, although statistics against foreign-committed crimes are disproportionately represented in the Japanese media. See: http://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2013/07/08/issues/police-foreign-crime-wave-falsehoods-fuel-racism/

[208] See: http://time.com/4511744/american-military-bases-overseas/

Section II: Aesthetics of Resistance (Part I)

Akita-ben

For Yano-san

秋田 Akita prefecture, whose name means "autumn rice field"; 弁 *ben*, meaning dialect. Not to be confused with 便 *ben*, meaning poop, which is what's connoted if you just say *ben* without specifically referencing regional speech pattern. A lesson I learned through experience.

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Japanese is one of those languages, like Latin, that contains seemingly countless possibilities to conjugate a single verb. It's mind-boggling, and unless proven otherwise, I maintain that teachers of both languages must derive some sort of pleasure from confusing students on exams. Hey, gotta weed them out somehow, right? Unfortunately, this doesn't include the diehard students in most Japanese language classes: Americans who *really* wish they were either *anime* characters, samurai warriors, ninjas, or all three. This isn't to say that taking Japanese isn't fun, per se, but with so much of energy dedicated to remembering how to say something, *anything*, with 100% correct grammar – and warding off death stares from Sailor Moon -- the process of learning to speak coherently renders many non-native Japanese speakers… exhausted, to say the least. On top of that, verbs are conjugated according to politeness to such extremes that the honor- and humblerifics (and yes, "humblerifics" is a real thing) are essentially separate languages altogether. Even Japanese people admit, sighing, that

they can *never* remember how to say it in *son keigo* 尊敬語 (the highest form of politeness, except for whatever it is you use when talking to the emperor).

So basically, if you make a mistake, you sound both stupid *and* rude.

The grand irony of it all is that you're taught the driest, most formal, polite, distance-creating forms of the language in the classroom that you a) basically would never use anyway, except b) if you don't have any friends. So, like any language, the best way to learn Japanese is to go to where it's spoken and get a feel for it. When I first moved to Japan in 2009, after having only half-heartedly studied the language for a year (needless to say, I didn't do too well on all those grammar quizzes), I ended up picking things up quickly out of sheer necessity: living on a rural island nestled between Shikoku and the mainland, it was the only option. Not only that, but I ended up learning what's considered an 田舎臭い *inaka-kusai* ("stinking of the countryside") form of Japanese that, while forging a certain degree of immediate intimacy with Japanese people due to sheer novelty ("Haha! She sounds like an old fisherman!"), later proved problematic in getting taken seriously.

Upon matriculating graduate school two years later, the Cornell Japanese Department had a hard time placing me in a class. "She speaks with fluency and has an ability to communicate what she wants to say, but this verb conjugation chart is all over the map—these are first-year mistakes. Her vocabulary is nuanced and practical, but it's unpolished, informal. And what's with the Kansai-ben??"[209] But after two years of courses and a summer of intensive

[209] The dialect and stress used in western Japan: Osaka and Kyoto, along with Hyogo, Wakayama, and Mie prefectures.

study, however, my Japanese was finally "fixed." I was well-prepared to move to Japan again, this time in Tokyo, to undertake formal research.

While I could more smoothly (although certainly not perfectly) get through a formal interview or networking event, something important felt lost… unrecovered, and missing. Indeed, it was precisely because I was finally able to speak "properly" in Japanese that there seemed to be more distance in my relationships. Part of that is inevitable, since it's difficult to make friends upon moving to any major city. This might be particularly true with Tokyo as a metropolitan area with tens of millions of people, and many foreign tourists; as a result, a foreigner who looks as stereotypically like a *gaijin* 外人(slang for foreigner; literally, "outside person") as I do (tall, blonde hair, blue eyes… check!) becomes totally anonymous, for better or worse.

So while I didn't have children following me around grocery stores shouting *GAIJIN!! GAIJIN!!!!!* at the tops of their lungs anymore, it was perhaps even more shocking when a waiter once took a Japanese menu out of my hands *as I was reading it* to give me the English language version, totally unprompted. It got to be quite difficult, being seen day after day only just another outsider in the mad rush of the Concrete Jungle, where no one seems to have the time to treat each other like the complex human beings they are. I often felt invisible, adrift at sea, and very isolated.

But once a month, I got to escape to Akita for dance lessons—and a much-needed vacation from the formal, distant interactions with Tokyoites.

Unlike the formal Japanese one hears so often in Tokyo if not in social situations then over loudspeaker announcements in train stations, department stores, and even in the street, Akita-ben is direct, to the point, and practical – and scarce, not least because there aren't many train stations or department stores in Akita to begin with. Akita-ben is economical, lacking the formality that stifles more standard modes of speaking. Natives to this distant, northern prefecture still use the standard polite verb conjugations of *masu/desu* ます・です, but don't get more polite than that unless it's absolutely necessary (*son keigo* is almost laughably out of place there). Some of the older people might not even use *masu/desu* at all, skipping all ornamental language to get right to the point: who are you, and why are you here? And do you need help finding your way?

It's expressive, but not sweet-- crisp and bright, yet soft and pearly, like the chirping of chickadees or other birds that don't fly south for the winter. There's a roundness to Akita-ben, with generous use of the emphatic, nasal ん (*n*) that softens intent and obscures the speaker's ego – a mark of beautiful Japanese anywhere. But it's also markedly peppered with unusual, foreign sounds like ベ (*be*, pronounced "bay") and ぜ (*ze*, pronounced "zay") rarely heard in standard Japanese due to the influence of the language of the Ainu people, who originally settled, or coexisted with, this northern wilderness.

So since Akita is rural and isolated to begin with, most people not only don't speak "normal" Japanese, they also don't speak any English; Akita-ben is thus rendered the default lingua franca, even if you're a foreigner. From what I can glean, the reasoning flows accordingly:

if you're in Akita to begin with, you must know *something* about Japan or speak some kind of Japanese, because you wouldn't have made it up here if you didn't. And if you understand Japanese, then you can probably navigate the way we talk up here. It may be a bit different, but really it's all pretty much the same thing, ain't it?

Well, not exactly, but having it be assumed that you know *more* of what's going on rather than *less* is a rare treat compared to life in Tokyo.

The irony is that Akita-ben is, in fact, notoriously difficult to understand. Although Kansai-ben probably wins the contest for the most distinctive and easily recognizable dialect in Japan, Akita-ben is known as among the most incomprehensible.[210] And people are proud of that, if saddened by how local young people don't speak it these days since it would limit their job prospects elsewhere, or it's too backward-sounding, or there's never an opportunity to speak it except with your grandparents. And maybe that's true.

But it's also true that cab drivers speak some of the most prolifically incomprehensible Akita-ben out there, along with keepers of noodle shops and inns, as well as musicians and dancers, car rental center clerks, and people you bump into on the street. Which means that, in order to speak Akita-ben, you have to take out the earplug, get off the smartphone, leave your head, and enter the present moment, where the gentle pace of a Japan past is being lived by increasingly fewer people. When in Akita – and to speak Akita-ben -- do as the Akitans do, right?

[210] Along with Akita's northern neighbor, Aomori.

It's also true, leaving Husserl, Derrida, and other deconstructionist semantic theorists aside for the moment, that language is so much more than words: it's about what's being communicated in the first place. So while the man who took the menu out of my hands in Tokyo spoke to me in the politest form of Japanese and bowed profusely after I informed him that I wasn't having problems but was simply making up my mind as to what I wanted to eat, he was communicating a very clear message (intentionally or not): you are fundamentally different from me. And while the man in the grocery store in Akita during a white-out blizzard had let me know -- without knowing for sure that I was indeed "the researcher" people had heard about – that dance rehearsal had been cancelled (but best of luck anyhow) had used a brusque local dialect without any polite conjugations, formalities, or ornamental bowing, he too communicated a very clear message (intentionally or not): you are fundamentally *similar* to me.

Like all good things, one must actively seek Akita-ben to find it. One must *be in Akita* to hear it. And while it can be somewhat hard to find, it is there, in the background, like the song of a chickadee: staccato yet soft, bold yet unpretentious, humble yet strong. Ain't that the truth?

Chapter 2: Traditional Music

For Oide-san

With AKB48 potentially slated to open for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the significant government investment in popular culture, and the ubiquity of its aesthetic throughout the country, it might seem that J-pop is music most representative of contemporary Japan: its sonic mascot. At the same time, Japanese popular music culture has been deeply influenced by American popular music sensibilities since its inception. To some ears, then, J-pop may very well represent not the future of Japan, but rather its death. In her piece "A Roadmap to Millenial Japan," Tomiko Yoda identifies this crisis in what she calls the "Return to J", as in J-pop. She writes:

> National culture itself was always an abstraction, forging unity out of heterogeneous customs and narratives, thus patching up radical historical transformations and ruptures into a seamless continuity. While insisting upon its autonomous meaning and identity, it actually relies on the international framework of the modern nation-state system to mark its interiority. J-culture may represent, however, a new level of abstraction from the concrete social context in that the signifier of locality can be immediately... subsumed into the general economy of value underwritten by global capital. The production and marketing of J-culture, therefore, is as native to the postmodern consumer society as the commercialization of multiculturalism. The proliferation of J-markings in 1990s Japan signals not the resurfacing of the national (regressing into it) against the tide of global postmodernity but its continual waning.[211]

While Yoda's assertion that the "Return to J" represents the weakened confidence in Japan as a state and an economy is correct, the election of current Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2012 and the policies he has since championed suggests that Japan is, in fact, experiencing a

[211] Tomiko Yoda, "A Roadmap to Millennial Japan," in *Japan After Japan: Social and Cultural Life from the Recessionary 1990s to the Present,* ed. Tomiko Yoda and Harry Harootunian (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 47.

resurgence of the national rather than its waning. Much like in the US, the demographic perhaps most supportive of his neonationalist can be found in rural areas; indeed Abe's political posters are easily found even in the deepest pockets of the Japanese countryside. Ironically, these are the very areas that have been most dramatically impacted by the postwar "growth" and the more contemporary Abenomics fiscal policies that have concentrated industry – and job opportunities -- in major cities, particularly Tokyo. The result is rural decay: abandoned businesses and houses paved over with pachinko parlors, fast food restaurants, chain retailers, and box stores.

Amidst this silent struggle – and returning the discussion to music -- rural Japan boasts a lively festival culture where traditional instruments, notably *taiko* drums, *fue* wooden or bamboo flues, and *shamisen* lutes are played at seasonal celebrations or holidays. In fact, the fishing village on the southern coast of rural Awaji Island where I lived for two years was my first introduction to indigenous Japanese music. Hearing the *taiko* drums of what I later found out to be a *bon odori* Festival of the Dead procession, I was lured out of my apartment and, from what it seemed, transported to another time. In subsequent visits to festivals where similar kinds of music was performed, I began to wonder how and why people navigate these two aesthetic worlds: the capitalist aesthetic alienating us from the reality it actively decays, and the tradition reminding us that things weren't always this way.

In this chapter, I consider the politics of traditional Japanese music and dance performance in its contemporary context. My conceptualization of tradition is in congruence with Dorothy Noyes' idea of folklore as an interplay between performance and social action – the interactions of which "serves as both an independent source of value and a resource for

actors to realize and negotiate intentions [between[formal and social dimensions of practice."[212] Here, I similarly understand this festival with its everyday context, and argue that the musical world is counterculture—functioning as a mode of resistance against the mass culture encroaching on both physical and aural realities in Japan. My primary case study is the Nishomonai Bon Odori (西音馬内盆踊り) Festival of the Dead (henceforth referred to as Nishimonai), with which I have become familiar through years of dancing and a year and extensive fieldwork in its hometown of Ugo, Akita prefecture. Responding to discourse that has tended to historicizes so-called "traditional" music as pure, distilled, or static, I will show that the performance of this music (and dance) is, in practice if not in intent, a politicized reenactment imagined against the contemporary forces that might very well lead to Nishimonai's spiritual and perhaps physical extinction. Ultimately, I suggest that the other-worldly aesthetic of Nishimonai – as well as that of other contemporary performances of traditional music– functions as a mode of resistance by way of community formation: the antidote to alienation.

Nishimonai Bon Odori: History, Characteristics, Context

Nishimonai Bon Odori is a yearly music and dance celebration somewhere between a festival and a ritual. Like other bon odori (literally "*bon* dances," or the dances accompanying the Buddhist holiday of *obon*) across Japan -- each of which have their own distinct song and dance[213] -- Nishimonai concludes *obon* festivities for the year with live music and an

[212] Dorothy Noyes, *Humble Theory: Folklore's Grasp on Social Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 132.

[213] Much could be written about these differences, but for the sake of organization a footnote will suffice. In the process of selecting a field site for my research, I have attended close to twenty music and dance festivals

accompanying dance procession performed in the street, usually the central avenue of the city or village. Over 700 years old, Nishimonai is named for what is now called the central sub-district of the township of Ugo, located in the ricefields below towering Mt. Chokai in southern Akita prefecture.

A holiday with Buddhist underpinnings that takes place over a few days every year in mid-August, *obon* commemorates one's ancestors; it is a time when Japanese across the country return to the region where their family is from to spend time with relatives and visit the graves of those who have passed on.[214] Most workplaces grant at least a few days of leave during *obon*, and many Japanese take advantage of this rare opportunity to relax to take a vacation out of the major cities. Needless to say, bullet trains servicing Akita and other rural parts in Japan, particularly in the northern region of Tohoku, that rarely get any major traffic are absolutely inundated during this time.

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throughout Japan, most of which were bon odori. Although categorizing music and dance trends according to region is as difficult as it is potentially overgeneralizing, it seems that the music of northern regions – including Akita – has a longer, comparatively complex, and more prominent flute melody than other *obon* songs. Additionally, rhythms played on taiko drums – which are much larger in northern regions, sometimes up to six feet tall and requiring two people to properly play as in the Kemanai Bon Odori (毛馬音内盆踊り) of northern Akita prefecture – tends to be slower and more stoic, punctuating the melody at important transition points for the dancers. Dance protocol in northern regions often includes donning long, cotton face masks (*hikosa zukin*, 彦さ頭巾) that completely cover the face save for two tiny eye holes; the most well-known dance of this style in Japan is not the surprisingly obscure Nishimonai, but the Kaze no Bon 風の盆 dance of Toyama Prefecture. In contrast, western and southern styles tend to have a faster, pulsating, lighter rhythm beaten out on smaller drums by musicians who join the dancers in the procession. The drums are perhaps the central feature of the music – by the end of the night, drummers improvise rhythms together on the street without any melodic accompaniment -- with a light and simple accompanying melody played on flutes and *shamisen* lutes. Like Nishimonai, dancers are often seen wearing straw hats (*amigasa*, 編み笠), but unlike in the northern regions dancers in the south have their faces exposed. The most famous example of this style is by far the Awa Odori (阿波踊り) of Tokushima prefecture, which also boasts a separate dance for male and female dancers.

[214] If one's parents are from the same area, families visit both grave sites; otherwise, families tend to gather at the most rural location of one's ancestors.

Although my experience indicates that a majority of Japanese have never so much as heard of it[215], Nishimonai is classified as one of the "Big Three" bon odori (三大盆踊り) in Japan, with the other two slots occupied by the much more famous Awa Odori (阿波踊り) of Tokushima prefecture and Gujo Odori (郡上祭り) of Gifu prefecture. Its obscurity is partly due to its remote location within the already distant, rural Akita prefecture. Ugo cannot be reached by train, and requires a twenty-five minute drive into rice paddies and the looming shadow of Japan's second tallest peak -- Mt. Chokai, considered the "mini Mt. Fuji" -- from the nearest station of Yuzawa, which is only serviced by a "one-man" two-car train (*wanman ka*,ワンマンカー) that runs just a handful of times a day.

Because of its isolated location and because its fame does not reliably extend beyond Akita and other parts of the Tohoku region, the festival is nearly entirely organized by and for locals. This isn't to say that there is an explicit lack of interest to spread the word, but rather that the festival is mainly supported by grassroots outreach efforts. The primary organizing force behind Nishimonai is the Nishimonai Bon Odori Preservation Society (*Nishimonai bonodori hozonkai* 西馬音内盆踊保存会), which organizes the festival every year, handles finances, procures musicians – mainly dedicated locals and interested high school students – and sets up day-of necessities for the festival, such as bleachers and benches for viewers. The

[215] In fact, I'd say that the most common response to hearing about Nishimonai is confusion about its rather strange name and unorthodox pronunciation of *kanji* characters that doesn't resemble contemporary Japanese. I have been told that this is due to the strong cultural influence of the now nearly extinct Ainu ethnic minority that once heavily populated the northern regions of Japan.「ニ。。シ。。モ。。ナイ？何それ！」("Ni… shi… mo… nai? What even is that?")

Preservation Society was formed in 1947. Now, the Society holds monthly dance rehearsals, which I attended during my primary fieldwork from 2014-2015, from January until August in central Ugo's Preservation Society Hall –by far the newest and nicest building in town – and organizes the Nishimonai Bon Odori extracurricular club activity (*bukatsu* 部活) at the local middle school.[216] The Preservation Society Hall boasts a small museum that displays vintage kimonos, masks, and straw hats worn by dancers of decades past, a video of the dance that plays on loop, and pamphlets about the history and meaning of the dance in both Japanese and English. Other duties include managing Facebook page alerting followers of outreach events in which the society occasionally participates, such as presentations about Japan's traditional music and dance or national cultural festivals.

As a group committed to the continued existence and relevance of this music and dance, the Preservation Society discourages any contemporary or otherwise alternative interpretations or variations in their performances. In contrast, the independently run Kita no Bon sister preservation society holds live performances and releases individually produced CDs (e.g. burned from a computer) of Nishimonai's music with a wide range of instrumentation, including hard rock and smooth jazz. Yano Eitaro, head of Kita no Bon, arranges most, if not all, of these alternative performances. In an interview we had in the fall of 2014, he shared that he, too, believes it's important to keep the music and dance of Nishimonai relevant, but that this might be best achieved through making it more accessible to audiences of today with

[216] Please refer to "The Dance Teacher" for more details.

contemporary instrumentation.[217] A jazz musician himself, Yano-san also frequently collaborates with local musicians even if they are not explicitly interested in Nishimonai. Nonetheless, his dedication to the festival is palatable in all of his efforts, as he believes that music events held in the area are at least peripherally linked to the looming history of Nishimonai.

Fig. 14: Graphic for the inaugural Ugo Jazz Festival in November of 2014.

Whether smooth jazz and hard rock renditions of Nishimonai's music make it more relatable to present-day listeners is a separate discussion, but at any rate, Nishimonai's music and dance are hauntingly distant – nearly alien in sound and appearance, even when compared to other bon odori in Japan. Nishimonai's music and dance are particularly somber and deeply stirring, befitting of the unique symbolism of the dancers who, unlike in other bon odori, are meant to actually represent ancestral spirits: the masks obscure the dancers' faces, just as time has obscured the faces of those who have passed on.

[217] Perhaps a synthesized version of the songs – at triple the tempo and, of course, with a build up to a massive beat drop – would connect more with younger audiences today.

Also unique to Nishimonai is that there are two songs instead of the usual one, and two separate accompanying dances. The first, called *ondo* (音頭, a general term for a song that establishes mood), dates back to around the year 1288, when it was originally performed as an annual harvest dance. The second – *ganke* ("gan-kay", がんけ) – dates back to around the year 1593, when a local feudal lord fell from his position in power, and a bon odori was created to console the spirits of his clan.[218] Although slightly shorter in duration than *ondo, ganke* is considered the more difficult dance of the two, as it requires tricky moves such as grabbing and releasing the sleeve of one's kimono without exposing the hand, and spinning in a circle without lifting one's feet off the ground – particularly difficult to do in *tabi* two-toed socks and *zouri* straw sandles! To be fair, *ondo* is difficult in its own right, with a longer sequence of steps that, although easier to learn, seem more difficult to master – at least in my experience.

Constantly keeping one's fingers delicately curved backward to mimic the shape of a crescent moon is surprisingly exhausting!

Ondo and *ganke* have the same instrumentation: medium-sized taiko drums, *fue* bamboo flutes played horizontally (like western flutes and unlike the *shakuhachi*), *shamisen* three-stringed lutes, percussive bells, and (male) singers. While the lyrics for *ganke* are serious, and never improvised or added upon, creative liberties are allowed to be taken for *ondo*. True to the meaning of *ondo'*s moniker (meaning "starting sound"), singers often make puns about how many people are in town for the festival, how crowded the (somewhat) nearby Yuzawa

[218] Nishimonai Information Packet.

train station is, and even some sexual humor to establish a fun and exciting atmosphere for the audience. Indeed, many of the people who come to Nishimonai – tens of thousands every year -- are from out of town. Some purchacse expensive tickets in the bleacher areas that line the procession (and therefore offer the best view), but most people spread out on tarps on the ground, drinking beer and the famous local *sake,* eating fish-on-a-stick, corn dogs, *pinsuyaki* custard cakes, and other classic Japanese festival foods while chatting with friends and enjoying the music and dance.

Ondo primary lyrics:

ヤートーセ　ヨーイワナーセッチャ　　*Yatose yoiwana seiccha*

(キタカサッサ　ドッコイナ）　　*Kitakasassa dokkoina*

(*kakegoe* syllabus to establish a festive atmosphere)

時勢はどうでも　　*Jissei wa doudemo*

No matter the times

世間はなんでも　　*Seikan wa nandemo*

No matter the world

踊りコ踊らんせ　　*Odoriko odoranse*

The dancers are dancing

(アーソレソレ）　　(*a, sore sore)*

(*kakegoe*)

日本開闢天の岩戸も　　*Nihon kaibyaku ten no iwato mo*

And even [at] the opening of Japan from its heavenly cliffs

踊りで夜が明けた　　*Odoride yoru ga aketa*

The night is brightened by dancing

(キタカサッサ　キタカサッサ　ドッコイナ）

Ganke lyrics:

ヤートーセ　ヨーイワナーセッチャ	*Yatose yoiwana seccha*
(*kakegoe*)	
揃うた揃うたよ	*Sorouta soroutayo*
Harvested, it's been harvested	
踊り子揃うた	*Odoriko sorouta*
The dancer harvested	
稲の出穂より	*Inari no shutsuho yori*
Emerging from the [edge] of the rice field	
ササなお揃うた	*Sasana osorouta*
Bamboo grass has been harvested	
(ソラ　キタカサッサ	*Sora kitakasassa*
ノリツケハダコデシャッキトセ）	*noritukehadako deshakkitose*
(*kakegoe*) [219]	

The *honban* (本番) main festival takes place annually on the nights of August 16th, 17th, and 18th, beginning at 7pm. Musicians perform on the second-floor balcony of the Preservation Society Hall, and are lightly amplified through a system of speakers hooked up throughout the main street in the Nishimonai district of Ugo, where the dance procession takes place in front of old wooden shops -- open sporadically the rest of the year, due to low business -- that look as though they're from a different century. The center of the street is lined with bon fires in

[219] Translation by author.

metal urns ablaze with freshly cut Akita cedar, which give off the tree's beautiful scent and light the way for the dancers who form a clockwise loop about a kilometer long on either side of the street. While dancers can technically enter and exit wherever there is space, several designated start/stop points dot the procession; this is also where many of the professional photographers camp out to nab shots of the dances' more iconic poses.

The first two hours of the *honban* are informal, designated for children and amateurs; accordingly, this is also the time when the audiences tends to eat, drink, and chat amongst themselves, or wander around the stalls that sell local or Nishimonai-themed knick-knacks, local sake, and other souvenirs. Veteran and serious dancers make up the procession from 9pm to 11pm, when the general atmosphere of the festival becomes more serious and quiet. *Ganke* and *ondo* rotate after being continuously played for around fifteen or twenty minutes at a time, and during the final rotation of *ganke*, the musicians speed up and slow down the tempo at random to excite the audience (and confuse the dancers). This also signals the pending end of the procession, which is officially marked by a rhythm pounded out on the drums with an accompanying simple flute melody, known as a *yosedaiko* call in traditional Japanese music.

Then, suddenly, the party is over, and everyone leaves. To beat the traffic, we dancers rush to our cars (which, if you're lucky, are parked in a secret lot close to the procession overseen by men who have a soft spot for Akita *bijin* – or the famed "beauties of Akita prefecture" of lore) and drive home wearing our kimonos and yukatas – but without the masks.

Between "Traditional" and "Folk": Problems of Preservation

The music and dance of Nishimonai, together with the remote location in a notoriously rural and isolated area of Japan, create an atmosphere that is one-of-a-kind. The first time I saw this festival, which was largely by accident on a preliminary research trip to Japan in the summer of 2013 while I was in Akita to visit a separate bon odori altogether, I felt as though I had stumbled through a time portal to an era I couldn't exactly pinpoint. Nishimonai felt timeless and old, but not self-consciously historical or museumized – it wasn't *boring*. Indeed, the spiritual energy of the festival left a deep impression; even though it is one of the Big Three bon odori, it felt like a small, local, intensely personal ritual that was almost uncomfortable to witness. Unlike its cousin Awa Odori in Tokushima prefecture, which I had seen on this research trip and several times before when I lived on the nearby Awaji Island, there were no gaudy tourist traps, no incomprehensibly drunk people staggering the streets, no large crowds, no drummers or dancers grabbing my hand to "get the foreigner to dance" – although, to be fair, the festival's famous motto is "you look like an idiot if you dance, and you look like an idiot if you don't dance, so you might as well dance"[220]… and it *is* a lot of fun to join in. In contrast, Nishimonai – the music and dance for which I found stunningly beautiful for its subtlety and mystery-- seemed like an intimate experience for the musicians and dancers, and indifferent if not slightly skeptical or even unwelcoming to the audience-- and you most certainly cannot join in unless you have practiced and are properly dressed.

Basically, the first time I saw Nishimonai, it was love at first sight.

[220] 踊る阿呆にみる阿呆　同じ阿呆なら踊らにゃ損々 : *odori aho ni miru aho, onaji aho nara odoranya sonson*

It was also exactly what I was looking for in a research project because it serves as a profound case study for the struggles facing traditional music cultures in Japan, and likely in other late capitalist societies. As David Hughes points out, traditional music culture often faces a tough decision: to be protected by a preservation society and risk becoming a spectacle rather than a ritual, or to go extinct. In the article "Folk Music: From Local to National to Global," he explains:

> A work song [for example] that survives in something like its original form does so only through the conscious efforts of a 'preservation society' (*hozonkai*). These proliferated especially in the latter twentieth century, largely in response to folkloric nostalgia or to move active fears that traditional values are dying in the face of Westernization and modernization. Most *hozonkai* are community-based and 'preserve' only one cherished local song… [what's more,] Hozonkai members often resent the modifications wrought on their treasured local songs by professionals.[221]

Indeed, Nishimonai's Preservation Society is no exception; it was formed after a two-year hiatus of the festival "amidst the confusion the year the war ended," and in direct response to the rapid forces of Westernization in the immediate postwar.[222]

However, Nishimonai faces a dual struggle because traditional Japanese music scholarship – another important means through which this music is preserved – largely does not consider bon odori "traditional" in the first place. To be sure, many scholars on the subject explicitly call for Japan's ancient music to be protected, and ultimately heard. In an article co-written by Alison Tokita McQueen and David Hughes—two of the most prominent scholars of Japanese traditional music – make known their preservationist stance, remarking: "music is a fragile, vulnerable art. There was very little purely instrumental music [in Japan] and music was

[221] David Hughes, "Folk Music: From Local to National to Global," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Japanese Music* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2008), 290, 293.
[222] Nishimonai Information Packet.

rarely an independent art form until very recently, which is largely why it did not survive modernization well."[223] English language scholarship's preservation efforts, with rare exception[224], are thus almost exclusively centered on ancient, medieval, and pre-Meiji musical styles – such as *gagaku* court music, the musics of *noh, kabuki* and the puppet theater, the *shakuhachi* flute, songs played on the *biwa* and *shamisen* lutes, and the *koto* zither. This scholarship prioritizes research on organology, music theory, and historical context, with little to no focus on socio-cultural contexts or contemporary performance practice. Similarly, it seems that Japanese scholarship on traditional Japanese music – which only became a subject of study after Western operates according to the logic of *nihonjinron* – theories of Japanese people – that asserts an inherent uniqueness to these musics, or their inherent impenetrability to non-native ears.[225]

Non-academic efforts also champion these musics as traditions to be preserved, with much of the financial backing that supports venues and performances comes from either universities or the government to bolster a postwar conception of Japanese culture. Alison Tokita explains:

> The concept of a 'national culture' is largely a modern one, a feature of the modern nation-state. Since the discrediting of the militarist and imperialist state, as postwar Japan developed into an economic superpower, it has actively cultivated cultural

[223] Tokita and Hughes, "Context and Change in Japanese Music," *The Ashgate Research Companion to Japanese Music,* 25.

[224] Notably Bonnie Wade's *Composing Japanese Musical Modernity*, David Novak's *Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation,* and Ian Condry's *Hip-Hop Japan: Rap and the Paths of Globalization,* Michael Bourdagh's *Sayonara America, Sayonara Nippon: A Geopolitical Prehistory of J-pop*, Carolyn Stevens' *Japanese Popular Music: Culture, Authenticity, Power.*

[225] This was what I was told in response to an inquiry about which Japanese language sources on the topic I should research. Rather than reinvent the wheel and spend more time than I have looking for these sources, I trusted the advice of my interlocutor: Professor Alison Tokita herself, one of the pioneers of the relatively obscure field of Japanese ethnomusicology. Conversation, Alison Tokita, Kyoto City University of the Arts, November 2017.

> nationalism as a substitute, based on ideas of cultural uniqueness. Supported by the Japanese government, performance genres such as *no* and *kabuki* have served to represent Japan culturally overseas in the postwar period.[226]

Another non-academic preservation effort is JAPONisme, a society "shares the heart and culture of Japan through seminars, consorts, performances, and other such activities."[227] In addition to publishing their own quarterly magazine, JAPONisme brings together musicians, professors, and other advocates of Japanese culture to share local traditions both within Japan and domestically. Indeed, JAPONisme has also collaborated with the Cool Japan campaign.[228]

Lastly, but importantly, musicians of indigenous Japanese instrumental (or vocal) performance themselves play perhaps the largest role in traditional music preservation. Often doubling as teachers as well as performers, these musicians demonstrate the inextricable link between Japanese music (and other arts) are through the pedagogical principles of *iemoto* and *natori*, which Tokita and Hughes explain as follows:

> *Iemoto* means the household head, or the master who controls the family business (art in this case), implying a fictive famiy relationship paralleling the blood links found in *gagaku*, and often in *no* families. Beneath the *iemoto* in the hierarchy are professional performers and teachers who have been granted a professional name, so they are termed *natori* (name-takers).[229]

In taking on students, traditional Japanese music teachers preserve aspects of this culture at the same time that they perpetuate it.

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[226] Tokita and Hughes, "Context and Change in Japanese Music," *The Ashgate Research Companion to Japanese Music,* 3.
[227] JAPONISME, 2016, Summer, volume 10.
[228] Conversation, Alison Tokita, Kyoto City University of the Arts, November 2017.
[229] Tokita and Hughes, "Context and Change in Japanese Music," *The Ashgate Research Companion to Japanese Music,* 16. Urban legend has it that one of the most renowned masters of the *biwa* lute, currently based in the city of Nagoya in Aichi prefecture, refuses to take on any students despite the numerous requests from eager players. As one of the last blind biwa players alive in Japan today, many in the traditional music community find his resistance to participate in pedagogical practice mysterious, and distressing. Conversation, Alison Tokita, Kyoto City University of the Arts, November 2017.

Bon odori, however, is classified as "folk" rather than "traditional" and, as such, is understood as a living art that less urgently needs the championing of formal scholarship – in part because there are preservation societies for that purpose, and because methods of transference tend to be less formal (and more oral). Awa Odori, for instance, resembles a massive parade in appearance, structure, and atmosphere. The dance procession is made up of organized troupes of dancers, rather than dedicated individuals, ranging from professionals who practice the dance year-round to groups of coworkers trying something fun together. By the end of the night, the troupes flood the street and disintegrate to allow for informal, spontaneous participation while the musicians improvise on the street. Gujo Matsuri, the third bon odori of the Big Three, also allows for the spontaneous participation of audience members – dancers or not -- after the initial procession, which turns into an all-night dance party in the street around a massive bon fire.[230]

Nishimonai is an exceptional case study, however, as both formal and informal modes of transference sustain the existence of the festival. Formally, Nishimonai offers free monthly dance lessons at the Preservation Society Hall (and, for the extra rehearsals during month of August or if there is too much snow blocking the entrance to the Hall in the winter and spring months, at the Ugo Community Center) that anyone can join. Typically, two or three teachers from the Preservation Society volunteer to formally teach the steps according to a traditional vernacular known as *utafuri* (歌振り). Commenting on this system of transmission, Yano-san explained in an email: "When first remembering the steps, we don't use numbers like '1, 2, 3,

[230] Based on my observations of the festivals.

or 4' but instead practice alongside [the following] syllables as they're being called out [during *Ondo*]. This Is called *utaburi*. While it's not known why this system of singing/remembering came about, it's long been the way that dancers have memorized the steps."[231]

Fig. 15: Dance notation for Ganke.

Rehearsals run from seven to nine pm on the third Saturday of every month; for the first hour, amateurs and veterans are separated into two groups, with the former splitting off into two more groups to practice either *Ondo* or *Ganke,* while the latter practices both songs in alternation as its done in the *honban*. All music is played on portable CD players except for the rehearsals in the month of August, when musicians from the Preservation Society play the music live for dancers to get into the spirit – and for the musicians to practice, as well. After a short break, everyone joins together in the circle to practice together, while teachers provide specific advice – and sometimes adjust the dancers – in real-time. The end of rehearsal is marked with a recorded version of the *yosedaiko* drum pattern that signals both the start and

[231] Yano Eitaro, email, 7/15/15.

end of a musical event. After clapping along with *yosedaiko*, everybody bows, engages in light small talk, and heads home.

One can also have this experience in the Nishimonai instructional DVD available for purchase at the Preservation Society Hall Gift Shop: the DVD first shows both dances in succession, following with detailed instructions – complete with *utaburi* instructions– of *Ondo* and *Ganke*. The steps are rehearsed both in slow-motion, and in real-time with the music. Between rehearsals, the DVD proved to be an extremely effective means of becoming more fluent in the steps, particularly because one can stop and rewind if there's a confusing section. In fact, other serious dancers used the DVD to practice as well, particularly when they were first starting out.[232]

Interesting to note is that many veteran dancers in the festival – in some cases having danced for over ten years – still attend the rehearsals every month to continue honing their skills.[233] To be sure, one can easily learn the steps, but dancing beautifully requires commitment and experience that ultimately become embodied as an infinitely practicable craft. One doesn't truly master the dance until she bears the responsibility to pass it on to a younger generation: a hierarchical arrangement that defines the *iemoto* system of transference that some scholar-advocates of Japanese traditional music believe is definitive of Japanese

[232] This was the case with two of the three dancers with whom I formed a bond. Conversation, July 17, 2015, Yokote, Akita prefecture.

[233] The three dancers who came to look after me and greatly supported my dancing in the festival (for three years now, and counting) are case studies. In a conversation had over lunch the summer before my first festival, one of the three who, at the time, was participating in her eleventh festival said that there's always something to practice – and in true Japanese fashion, humbly added (though with a knowing smirk that revealed otherwise) that she isn't a particularly fluent dancer yet. Conversation, Yokote, Japan, July 2015,

traditional music in and of itself. As Tomie Hahn writes in *Sensational Knowledge*: *Embodying Culture through Japanese Dance*:

> I strongly believe that how dance is taught reveals a great deal about that culture as well as the individual dancers practicing the tradition… I view transmission as a process that spans the practices of both teaching and learning. To study transmission is to view a process that instills theory and cultural concepts of embodiment.[234]

The idea that the formal act of transference between the teacher and pupil is just as much part of the aesthetic as sound (or appearance) itself is exemplified by what is perhaps the most formal setting in which the music and dance of Nishimonai is passed on to a group of students: the Bon Odori Club held by the Preservation Society at Nishimonai Junior High School. A seasonal extracurricular club activity (*bukatsu* 部活) held during months of June, July, and August, the Bon Odori Club teaches interested students either the music or the dance, but not both. When I observed the bon odori club in August of 2015, I noticed that the same dance teachers who run the formal rehearsals at the Preservation Society Hall also taught the students at school. The pedagogical method and structure was nearly identical, except that the teachers who treated us adult students with soft smiles and patience were much stricter with these young students—and the students were, in turn, more obedient and reverent than us adults, some of whom come to the rehearsals only one time "just to try."[235] The air was serious: the teaches held themselves with a dignity that indicated that they were passing on an important piece of local heritage, and the students looked eager (and a bit nervous) to take on

[234] Hahn, *Sensational Knowledge,* 1-2.
[235] Conversation, Yano Eitaro, March 2015.

this responsibility. Worth noting is that the dance students were mostly girls, and the musicians mostly boys.

That the Bon Odori Club is an added responsibility for the students, who take it alongside their existing club activities, further shows that Nishimonai looms large in the local imagination. Having already suspected this given the statues and murals of dancers that are found everywhere in Ugo, I conducted an interview with the teacher at Nishimonai Junior High School who assists in running the Bon Odori Club to confirm some hypotheses. Asking if most young people living in Ugo know the dance already, she answered that most everyone – young and old – know the basics, or at least the more iconic poses (notably those that showcase the crescent moon hands). That being the case, many of the students in the Bon Odori Club are actually students from nearby schools in the further reaches of Ugo who aren't as exposed to the dance as those living in downtown Nishimonai, or even from other towns entirely. Moreover, because most of the young people in Ugo – particularly in the Nishimonai district – know the basics of the dance, the teacher expressed that she feels this prevents the students from taking the dance more seriously. She then added that, in her opinion, the Bon Odori Club is an important way to make sure this dance, as well as its spiritual foundations, reaches young people.[236] The formal act of transference of the dance and music, then, not only ensures their continued existence, but also nourishes a sense of respect for them, and toward the teachers. The willingness to become a *kouhai* under rather strict circumstances, such as the master-

[236] Interview, Anonymous, Nishimonai Junior High School, Ugo, Akita Prefecture, August 2015.

apprentice relationship that defines (Japanese) music or dance lessons, personalizes the experience: and once it's personal, it's truly embodied.

This system of hierarchical, embodied transference also creates what one trained in Western aesthetics might perceive as a hyper-focused attention to detail. The Japanese method of apprenticeship wherein one spends years honing a single skill is famously featured in the documentary film about a world-class *osushiya-san* お寿司屋さん sushi restaurant in Tokyo, *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*. In the film, an apprentice chef reveals that he spent ten years learning to master a single dish.[237] In a musical context, the road to mastering an instrument or dance is similarly long and bumpy; my *kouhai* mentors, for instance, still attend the monthly rehearsals despite having already participated in the festival for thirteen years. Musical fluency is also contingent on the master-apprentice relationship, and on putting this experience into practice through performance. Indeed, it is only through performance that one can learn what she needs to improve, and to bring these questions back to her teacher – or to the Preservation Society Hall in Ugo for the monthly dance lessons.

Or, as in my case, to the dancers who adopted me as their *kouhai* 後輩 underling and have encouraged my dancing for the past three and a half years. Each dance only lasts a matter of minutes, but there always seems to be areas to polish. For instance, my first year – when I only danced for the first of the festival's three nights – I was singularly focused on getting through the steps (and my nervousness) with as few errors as possible, while taking in the

[237] *Tamago-yaki* 卵焼き, or a Japanese-style omelet.

overall atmosphere. The mystery and delicacy of these delicate dances that had previously piqued my interest on the outside was replaced with razor-sharp concentration on the inside that recollected nearly a year's worth of embodied knowledge, hard-earned through practice both in and out of the dance lessons – and monthly excursions from Tokyo to Ugo, which the fellow dancers apparently thought was "crazy."[238] In the past two years, when I've danced for multiple nights each time, I've cumulatively focused on a specific point to improve: the second year I worked on the shape of my hands to more closely resemble the shape of a crescent moon, and the third added in footwork, particularly on taking more delicate, purposeful steps and on spinning more gracefully during *Ganke*.

Another addition to my dance routine in the past two years has been staying with one dancer in particular – S-san -- with whom I've developed a close relationship that, with regard to dancing in Nishimonai, mirrors the master-apprentice pedagogical system of transmission within Japanese music. Although our relationship is comparatively informal – I don't refer to her as *sensei* 先生 (teacher) and we relate over a range of topics unrelated to the dance as friends -- I go to her with my thoughts and questions about Nishimonai, to which she gives (sometimes stingingly) honest advice in return.[239] She is as invested in my progress as I am interested in learning from her, not least because her dancing is particularly beautiful: of the

[238]「だって、今日は東京から来たっていうことですか？それはちょっとクレージーですよ！」("Wait, you're saying you came from Tokyo, today, to be here? That's pretty crazy!" Conversation, February THIS DATE, 2015.

[239] S-san spares no detail in her advice and critiques. She encourages me to make small changes that I would not have thought to even considered otherwise – "hold your hands about two centimeters higher at this section, so they're exactly level with your eyes" "turn this foot about five more degrees to the left, but put your weight in the *opposite* foot," "when taking a backward step, slightly suspend your foot in the air *forward* before swooping it behind" – that ultimately make all the difference in dancing beautifully.

three dancers she considered the *senpai* 先輩, or most experienced, despite being the youngest of the group (other than me) at age 62.[240] Staying at her house before the start of the festival for the past two years has allowed the master-apprentice aspect of our complex friendship to bloom, as it has afforded an intimate transference of this embodied knowledge that extends beyond the dance: she, along with fellow dancer N-san, insist on getting me suited up in my *yukata* cotton summer kimono and *hikosa-zukin* mask every year. Truly, these relationships demonstrate another point made by Hahn on transmission, which she maintains "concerns the information flow between teacher and student—the sender and receiver cycle—and embraces the personal relationships that evolve."[241]

So, while *bon odori* aren't widely considered a "traditional" Japanese art, both the formal and informal hierarchical transference of embodied knowledge plays an essential role in the preservation of Nishimonai that therefore challenge generic boundaries between "traditional" and "folk". The efforts of the Nishimonai Preservation Society, as well as Kita no Bon, work to ensure that the music and dances themselves are heard and seen by younger audiences. In that process – particularly through the Preservation Society dance rehearsals and the Bon Odori Club at Nishimonai Junior High School, as well as in my own experience – the master-apprentice relationship definitive of Japanese traditional artistic pedagogy creates embodied knowledge. In conclusion, I argue that the process of handing down these embodied artistic practices might, itself, be a definitive aesthetic of traditional Japanese music. The lines

[240] Upon seeing her dance in the 2015 festival, my step-father -- with no formal knowledge or training in Japanese traditional arts whatsoever– could nonetheless sense her skills, commenting that she "moved like clouds" and was "stunningly beautiful." Conversation, August 16th, 2015.
[241] Hahn, *Sensational Knowledge,* 2.

drawn between "traditional" and "folk" – and other genres – are arbitrary, and perhaps even counterproductive in reaching the goal of protecting this music in the first place.

Inventing "Japanese" Heritage

Beyond the politics of genre within the relatively obscure field of Japanese ethnomusicology, the idea of "tradition" itself in broader scholarly discourses has long been problematized. In their classic exegesis of this concept, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger assert that all traditions are, in fact, invented. As socio-cultural practices, they explain, traditions are "normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a *suitable* historic past."[242] Because they enact teleological origin myths of inevitable socio-cultural unity, "traditions" are deeply connected to – and extensions of -- the logic of the nation-state, which Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein argue is always conceived of retroactively:

> The illusion [of historical representation in the nation-state] is twofold. It consists in believing that the generations which succeed one another over centuries on a reasonably stable territory, under a reasonably univocal designation, have handed down to each other an invariant substance. And it consists in believing that the process of development from which we select aspects retrospectively, so as to see ourselves as the culmination of that process, was the only one possible, that is, it represented a destiny.[243]

As symbols of heritage, then, traditions offer a roadmap for performers to enact the phantasm of not only the nation-state, but of the ethnicity which it so often represents. In other words,

[242] Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.
[243] Balibar and Wallerstein, *Ambiguous Identities,* p. 86.

and to return to Balibar and Wallerstein, traditions create "the heterogeneous yet tightly knit [structure of the nation-state] first in a network of phantasies and, second, through discourses and behaviors, which maintain a necessary relation with *nationalism* and contribute to constituting it by producing the fictive ethnicity around which it is so organized."[244]

In Japan, notions of ethnicity and a "pure Japanese race" – falling under the larger umbrella of *nihonjinron* discourse -- seem to be widely accepted. While these ideas are certainly not endemic to Japan, popular and scholarly insistence on Japan's "uniqueness" often rely on the country's long history and, of course, the traditional heritage that comes along with it to back these claims. However, Naoki Sakai reminds us to be aware that conceptions of Japan are inevitably steeped in the (Western and capitalist) logic of imperialism that seeks to retroactively define cultural and ethnic homogeneity in the first place. In *Translation and Subjectivity: On "Japan" and Cultural Nationalism*, he argues:

> It is impossible to undo the consequences of the history of imperialisms no matter how desperately one wishes that imperialisms had never been effectuated. We live in the effects of the imperialist maneuvers of the past and the progressive present, in their pervasive effects in which everyone in today's world is inevitably implicated.[245]

Following this logic, and equipping ourselves with the healthy skepticism of the (Japanese) national culturism that Sakai encourages, we can see that that Japan *itself* is an invention—a product of its traumatic encounters with the Western world in the nineteenth century. Balibar and Wallerstein succinctly describe this chain reaction, arguing that the nation-state is,

[244] Ibid, 49.
[245] Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity: On "Japan" and Cultural Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 18.

inherently, "a product of colonization: it has always been to some degree colonized or colonizing, and sometimes both at the same time."[246]

This isn't to say that the cultural artifacts that have come to be understood as "traditional Japanese music" aren't impressive in their own right, or are unworthy of preservation. *Gagaku* court music, for instance, dates back to the sixth century, and the music of *noh* theater to the thirteenth. With their alien aesthetics, these artifacts offer fascinating, inspiring glimpses into a distant past of samurai and ninja, and can shed light on historical artistic sensibilities and social relations. Even more comparatively recent music and dance, such as bon odori, offer alternative perspectives to the contemporary capitalist aesthetic, and even allow for anyone interested to learn the music or dance for themselves.

However, it is erroneous to claim that these musics are "Japanese." To do so not only enact the teleological historiographic project that serves as the foundation of any nation-state – itself a construction – but also presupposes that these musics are somehow representative of *what has come to be understood as* Japan. Considering the notion of *kokugo* 国語, or the "national language" of Japan (which is, of course, Japanese), Naoki Sakai points out that "In Japan until the eighteenth century…. The mother tongue was not yet one's natural national language: nature and the nation had yet to be communicated."[247] In other words, the very concept of a "national language" at all is a projection—a rewriting of history to suit the (relatively) contemporary purposes of constructing and maintaining a sense of national

[246] Balibar and Wallerstein, *Ambiguous Identities,* 89.
[247] Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity*, 21.

community. Sakai's commentary on the politics of Japan's "national language" serves as an apt metaphor for the canonization of Japanese traditional music, which has taken place largely through the institutionalized efforts. In 1962, the National Theater in Tokyo was erected in Tokyo with the specific purpose of preserving the puppet as well as the Noh and Kabuki theaters, the latter two of which were once at total odds with one another.[248] Having since been considered traditional Japanese arts, this history is at once flattened into a new narrative of "heritage." As for Nishimonai, the establishment of the Preservation Society in 1947 also marks the start of when *Ondo* was no longer considered a harvest dance, and was performed as a bon odori to promote a changing sense of heritage.[249]

It is no coincidence that such major preservation efforts of traditional Japanese culture occurred in the immediate postwar, when Japan was rebuilding its national image. The defeat and the subsequent American Occupation, according to Japan scholar Marilyn Ivy, "meant the presumed purging of reactionary elements in a newly purified democratic modernity."[250] Although distance had been forged between indigenous and Western musical forms since the

[248] Originally intended as an art for the samurai elite, noh is highly esoteric, symbolic, and difficult to understand even for its aficionados. Plot lines are slow and often center on tales of important battles, poems, or moments of spiritual awakening. Kabuki, in contrast, was originally performed by prostitutes (first female and, following an uprising, male—which only caused more of a stir, as the men were seen as being more apt at capturing the elusive attractiveness of femininity than even women), and intended for the lowly merchant classes to enjoy. The theater caused quite the ruckus with its unruly, unrestrained performances; fans often became obsessed with their favorite players, spending all of their money to go to the shows. Kabuki was to be controlled or even destroyed several times throughout the Tokugawa period by the ruling samurai class, as many of the plots went so far as to defame the samurai. However, these efforts were largely unsuccessful, as the samurai themselves often went to great lengths to sneak into what was undoubtedly the more fun of the two theatrical arts. For a fabulously informative and beautifully written account of the cat-and-mouse game between the samurai and the kabuki theater, please see Donald Shively's brilliant 1959 article "Bakufu vs. Kabuki."

[249] To be sure, these distinctions are more or less arbitrary. The Gujo Odori, for instance, technically lasts for thirty-five days in the summer, with only four nights in August designated as the actual bon odori.

[250] Marilyn Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 14.

Meiji period[251], this only underscores the point that Japan's (re)creation of history is contingent on Western ideas of the nation-state. Returning to Sakai's point that the reverberations of Japan's encounters with and actions as an empire cannot be overlooked, the reconfiguration of history into a singular narrative plays an important role in Japan's postwar national-cultural consciousness, and ultimately constitutes what Ivy understands as the "imaginary." In *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan*, she writes:

> By using the idea of the imaginary, I am pointing to the element of phantasm that lies at the basis of national0cultural communities… It is the intertwining of these imaginaries within the United States, for example, and Japan that [compels this book project], but therein lies the historical rub: *Japan is literally unimaginable outside its positioning vis-à-vis the West.*[252]

And so, with tradition serving an important role in creating the "imagined community" of the nation-state which, in the case of "Japan," is deeply entrenched with Western cross-cultural imaginaries, we can arrive at a rather startling conclusion: perhaps the very idea of "traditional" Japanese music is… Western.

Identity and Politics in Akita

Of course, this isn't to say that Japan's postwar project of modernity is merely imitative of Western models; such a perspective replicates colonial, Euro-American understandings of history that posit "societies… such as Japan, whose modernity not only has been assimilated to the exemplars o the west but, when it is discussed, has been seen as either a copy of an original or, worse, an alternative."[253] Instead, Japan's retroactive creation of a coherent cultural-

[251] Please refer to the chapter on J-pop, specifically the section on Suiyoubi no Campenalla, for more information.
[252] Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing*, 4.
[253] Harry Harootunian, *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 5.

national narrative – particularly in the postwar—reflects the similarity of circumstances in societies that have endured the process of modernization. Italy, for example, claims ancient Roman civilization as a part of its heritage, yet Rome was an empire unto itself: a nation-state of its own that would likely have as much trouble identifying with contemporary Italian society as samurai would have finding common ground with Hello Kitty. Another, more urgent example might be in the United States. Would those who wrote the Second Amendment, at a time when firing a gun required loading gunpowder by hand and making one's own bullets, agree that the citizens of today should have the "right" to buy semi-automatic machine guns intended to kill hundreds of people at a time?[254]

Returning the discussion to Japan -- a place where "capitalist modernization… [transformed] urban sites into huge industrialized cities housing the everyday lives of the throngs who had left the countryside for work and a different kind of life" [255] throughout the twentieth century -- a vacuum emerged in the postwar amidst the present and an increasingly distant, mythologized past. The everyday routines of capitalist society – such as labor and regimented scheduling -- filled, and continue to fill that void. In postwar Japan, explains Marilyn Ivy, "a miracle dutifully [and fortunately] developed [in the postwar]: the so-called economic miracle, which allowed the manic overcoming of war's trauma through the

[254] To be fair, such rhetoric might be a continuation of the same guise of "freedom" upon which American values were built. For instance, *men* should be guaranteed the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—but not women, and certainly not African Americans. But at least such discussions take place in America; in Japan, racism is popularly understood as a foreign problem that exists between black people and white people in the US, despite the discrimination facing *zainichi* Koreans, Chinese, and other Asians living in Japan.

[255] Ibid, 2. Worth noting is that Harootunian's analysis of everyday life focuses in particular on Japan in the Taisho pre-war decades of the 1920s and 1930s, when Japan's modernization project marched forward in full swing. I argue that this ceaseless progression into an idealized "future" – a hallmark consequence of modernity – is equally applicable to the postwar years, when Japan was perhaps even more uncertain of its fate than ever before.

displacement of memories in the routines of overwork."[256] And although these new responsibilities kept the salaryman and housewife busy, Japanese society has been uniquely plagued, argues Harootunian, by its past. Building on Benedict Anderson's idea of "imagined communities," he writes:

> Beyond Anderson's idea of the ghostly [in *Imagined Communities*] is, I believe, the larger spectrality of societies deeply involved in fashioning a modernity coeval with Euro-America yet whose difference is dramatized by the revenant, the ghosts of what had been past and the premodern culture of reference that had not yet died, returning from a place out of time to haunt and disturb the historical present.[257]

Signs of Japan past haunting its present can be found nearly everywhere; cutesy cartoons of Hello Kitty dressed like samurai or ninja, say, come to mind. But one of the most salient examples of this haunting is in Japan's domestic tourism industry, which came into full bloom in the 1970s with the *Discover Japan* (ディスカバージャパン, *Disukaba Japan*) campaign by Japan Railways (JR). Returning once more to Marilyn Ivy and her inquiry into this campaign, she explains: "Travel to discover Japan… presumes both that one's point of departure, one's home is *not* Japan, and that the Japan motivating travel is incomplete, not fully locatable: there would be no need to travel if one were at the destination, no impetus for a journey if one sought to discover had already been found."[258] The very existence of such a campaign – which was successful in encouraging city-dwellers to travel to more rural areas of Japan that supposedly reflected the Japan of the mythologized past – demonstrates a deep sense loss. Indeed, "as culture industries seek to reassure Japanese that everything is in place and all is not lost, the

[256] Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing,* p. 14-15.
[257] Harootunian, *History's Disquiet*, p. 17.
[258] Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing*, p. 30.

concomitant understanding arises (sometimes obscurely) that such reassurance would not be necessary if loss, indeed, were not at stake."[259]

Although *Discover Japan* has long since passed, contemporary travel campaigns to variously remote areas of Japan remain ubiquitous. For several years now, JR has been pushing tourism in Tohoku – regional home to Akita, and also home to Fukushima. Important local industries in the Tohoku region, notably agriculture, were heavily impacted by the disasters of 3/11, which has caused devastating financial consequences in an area of Japan already home to some of the poorest prefectures in Japan.[260] Advertisements encouraging tourism to Tohoku play on several tropes that have come to popularly define the region: the strong and notoriously alien dialect, the long and harsh winters, the resilient populace living "with the land" as farmers, loggers, and fishermen, the slower pace of life (スローライフ, *suro- raifu*), the small trains traversing lush mountains and valleys, and the beautiful, untouched wilderness. Even within Japan, the way of life that dominates in Tohoku, whose population is rapidly shrinking as the few young people living there increasingly move to cities to find more lucrative

[259] Ibid, 10.

[260] In an article titled "Agricultural Conseuqences of the Great Japan Earthquake: Six Years Later," the authors note: "The initial official estimate for the direct economic losses from the March 2011 disaster was about 16.9 trillion yen ($210 billion USD) or 4% of the Gross Domestic Product of Japan (Figure 2). The greatest share of damages (61.5%) was for "Buildings, etc. (Housing, offices, plants, machinery, etc.)", followed by "Others (including agriculture, forestry and fisheries)" (17.7%), "Social infrastructure (river, road, harbors, drainage, and airport, etc.)" (13%) and "Lifeline utilities (water service, gas, electricity, and communication and broadcasting facilities" (7.7%). Anticipated damage in the sector "Agriculture" accounted for 11.24% of the total amount." Bachev, Harabrin and Ito, Fusao, Agricultural Impacts of the Great East Japan Earthquake – Six Years Later (May 31, 2017), 28.

or prestigious job opportunities or education, is considered particularly exotic.[261] Indeed, the most common reaction when I've mentioned my research to Akita to Japanese friends and acquaintances has been utter surprise—and few people in Japan seem to have ever visited Akita because of the very reasons that make it "exotic." The past haunts the present perhaps because it is so uninvitingly inconvenient and, much like a ghost, unsettling and frightening: indeed, the past as embodied by Tohoku serves as a painful reminder of loss, particularly after 3/11 and the dramatic reenactment of the imbalanced sacrifices made by rural areas to support the ultimately unsustainable lifestyle of distant, bright-lighted, big cities.[262]

Fig. 16: Retro vibes in JR's Ikuze, Tohoku *campaign, here specifically targeted for Akita.*

Yet while the pasts haunts the everyday present in urban areas, how has postwar Japan's grappling with capitalistic modernity affected areas understood as a microcosm *of* the past, like Akita? I argue that the past still haunts these areas, only in a political incarnation. A

[261] Following the success of *Discover Japan,* JR launched the so-called *Exotic Japan* (エキゾチックジャパン, *ekizochikku Japan*). For more information, please refer to Marilyn Ivy's aforementioned *Discourses of the Vanishing*.
[262] While I'm aware that this observation is not objective and the same can be said of the United States, I feel that it is nonetheless important to share that there is so much wastefulness in Japan. Plastic bags, disposable chopsticks, disposable *oshibori* wet hand towels, excess packaging… and for what?

trip to Ugo, Akita, or other similarly rural areas throughout the country will reveal to any observer a startling uniformity of political posters in support of current Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and the right-wing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) of which he also serves as the president.[263] First elected in 2012, Abe has become the second longest-serving Prime Minister in Japan's postwar history.[264] As Japan has a parliamentary democracy, citizens can only vote for the representatives who eventually vote in the election for Prime Minister.[265] The most recent election in October of 2017 was announced only a month prior by Abe, perhaps purposefully timed to coincide with the concurrent nation-wide concern over the most recent North Korean missile crisis that might make the population more inclined toward conservative military policy. Indeed, Abe is notoriously conservative both in foreign and economic policy, (in)famously expressing interest in re-militarizing Japan, and creating a new public event called the "Restoration of Sovereignty Day" in honor of the end of the US Occupation.

These posters, of which there are several varieties each of which are pictured below, each show pithy political slogans with neo-nationalist rhetoric that frames economic initiative in terms of socio-cultural relief from the recession plaguing Japan since the Bubble Burst: *keizai de kekka wo dasu* ("Producing [positive] results [for the country] through the economy") and *massugu, keiki wo kaifuku* ("Restoring the [political and economic] climate, directly").

[263] In contrast, political posters in urban areas tend to support a much wider range of political parties, including the Democratic Progressive Party (the main opponent to the LDP), the Communist Party, and the Koumeitou (公明党) party, connected to the Soka Gakkai New Buddhist Movement that is largely considered a religious cult. Worth noting is that the Koumeitou is actually deeply connected to the LDP, and essentially function as the same political party.

[264] He was first elected as Prime Minister, however, in 2006, when he served a single term until 2007.

[265] Many of my DJ and artist friends in the underground don't vote as a result, feeling that it is "pointless" and that the government is "inherently corrupt."

Fig. 17: Shinzo Abe's political posters.

In other words: Make Japan Great Again.

Indeed, Abe – much like Trump in the US – garners most of his support in rural areas that are perhaps the most deeply affected by the recession. According to a survey conducted in 2010, Akita is the fifth poorest prefecture in Japan in terms of gross income.[266] Many schools have a few as just a handful of students or are shutting down entirely, as there aren't enough students to fiscally justify operation; businesses are open at sporadic hours and run by people too old to still be working[267] The main industries in Akita are farming (especially rice), logging, sake-brewing, and tourism, none of which hold major appeal to young people of today who are inclined to seek more lucrative or prestigious careers in distant major cities. In fact, the median age in Akita is the highest in the country at 53.3 years old, making it a dramatic case study of

[266] See: http://stats-japan.com/t/kiji/10714
[267] Not because they're incompetent, but out of sheer respect.

the socio-economic effects of Japan's shrinking population: there just simply aren't enough people or job opportunities to sustain a robust local economy. [268]

With the majority of Akita's population having witnessed the Bubble Burst and the crumbling of the local economic infrastructure first-hand, the region – like other rural areas in Japan (and beyond) – are experiencing what cultural theorist Slajov Zizek has described as the pending sense of doom accompanying late modernity. While Japanese popular media and music assures consumers that everything is A-OK, everyday reality paints a different picture. Zizek argues that "it is the awareness that we live in an insulated artificial universe which generates the notion that some ominous agent is threatening us all the time with total destruction."[269] The political rhetoric of Abe that promises to "take back Japan" capitalizes on this anxiety, and is perhaps especially appealing to older populations who can more clearly remember the "good ol' days" of yore. Like Trump and his racist anti-immigration rhetoric, Abe has identified a strawman for the majority of Japan's (aging) population on which they can pin all their problems: the way things are today.

The dark humor of the situation, however, is that Japan's rural areas not only won't benefit from Abe's policies, but are actually harmed by them. The most famous of his policies to date is his "three arrowed" economic initiative, known as Abenomics.[270] Along with targeting inflation and supporting small businesses, Abenomics' primary initiative was to implement corporate tax cuts to stimulate the macro-economy under the assumption that corporate

[268] See" http://nbakki.hatenablog.com/entry/Average_Age_by_Prefecture_in_Japan_2013
[269] Zizek, Slavoj. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! (*New York: Verso, 2002), 33.
[270] In 2015, he implemented a second series of economic policies known as Abenomics 2.0.

growth would positively affect the middle class, much like the Trickle Down economics policies implemented in the United States under the George W. Bush Administration. A result is the substantial weakening of the yen, from around Y85 to $1 USD in 2012 to Y112 to $1 in 2017, and a 3% sales tax increase 2012 that is expected to inflate to 10% in 2019 -- barring a national disaster, in which case the tax hike would take place sooner.[271] While businesses might be benefitting from increased exports of Japanese goods and corporate tax cuts, the middle and working classes suffer from the increase in life expenses with no increase in pay-- and a decrease in the value of their currency, from around 80 yen to the dollar in 2009 to around 110 yen to the dollar in 2018. Essentially, the Japanese middle class – much like the American middle class – is shrinking.

What's more, rural Japanese economies, which are dependent on the success of small- to medium-sized farms, are actively damaged by Abe's support of the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement (TPP). Historically, the LDP has shared a deep connection with the Japan Agricultural Cooperatives, or JA, which provides financial subsidies to support farmers and keeps the price of rice – probably the most staple Japanese food item – high. This lucratively has seen JA develop a degree of political sway, particularly through behind-the-scenes lobbying that ultimately forged a deep connection with the LDP whose most important voting base is found in rural areas that benefit from JA's support. Economist Aurelia George Mulgan explains that, while officially politically neutral, "JA effectively functioned as the largest electoral support group for the LDP. JA benefited from this relationship because of the LDP dependence

[271] Japanese business leaders, however, are pushing for the tax increase to exceed 10%. See: https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/10/06/business/economy-business/planned-sales-tax-hike-may-delayed-economy-worsens-pre-2012-levels-suga/

on the farm vote and JA's powers as a vote-gathering organization. The LDP's electoral debt to farmers was one of the principle reasons why the government continued to support farmers."[272] Since the LDP has come out in support of the TPP, however, which would remove rice import tariffs that make up the bulk of JA's annual revenues, both JA and the farmers it supports are put at great financial risk.[273] While Abe's support of the TPP 2.0 is projected to improve his domestic and international image, which a recent Japan Times article has pointed out has been tarnished by "a growing consensus that Abenomics is a spent force,"[274] he and his bureau have essentially turned their backs on the very voter base that they continue to target.

A self-serving political economy: another manifestation of the capitalist aesthetic.

Nishimonai as Tourist Attraction: Negotiating the Capitalist Aesthetic

As discussed in the context of popular music, the creatively ceaseless, homogenizing marketization force is a hallmark of the capitalist aesthetic. Understanding this aesthetic as a social phenomenon, the capitalist aesthetic is easily detected in rural Japan, where the contrast between pre- and post-capitalist lifestyles is starkly contrasted. While urban centers like Tokyo and Osaka see train stations turned into shopping complexes boasting more or less identical shops, rural areas like Akita see the construction of Aeon Mall. Aeon, much like Wal-Mart, is a superstore that sells groceries, clothes, household goods, furniture, and electronics made

[272] Aurelia George Mulgan, "The Farm Lobby," in *Japanese Politics Today: From Karaoke to Kabuki Democracy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 112.
[273] It should be noted that supporting farmers is secondary to JA's primary agenda of making money. The agricultural cooperatives are actually a conglomeration of businesses, notably the JA Bank. Much like Monsanto in the US, small farmers are more or less coerced into joining JA not only for the helpful stipend, but also because their products have far less chance of being distributed if contracted through an independent distributor. The so-called "farm vote," then, has in fact been doubly manipulated, both by JA and the LDP.
[274] https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2017/07/21/commentary/japan-commentary/championing-tpp-2-0-give-abe-global-moment/#.Wjd2jIWcE2w

abroad with cheap foreign labor, and boasts its own bank, pharmacy, and line of movie theaters and performance venues.[275] Also like Wal-Mart, they are primarily found in suburban or rural areas of Japan where property development prices are comparatively cheaper. In fact, there are many Aeon Malls near Ugo in the neighboring conglomerated townships of Yuzawa and Yokote, along with other hallmarks of (Japanese) sprawl: chain restaurants, discount stores, and long stretches of concrete.

How has the small town of Ugo remained an oasis free of Aeon Malls and other sprawl? The reason is that, unlike most other small towns of its size in Japan, Ugo still operates as an independent township. In the 1990s, the Japanese government restructured much of the countryside to consolidate small villages and towns into large conglomerated townships, such as the aforementioned Yuzawa and Yokote, in a process known as *gappei* 合併 (to merge together). Financially, *gappei* makes sense each village no longer has to support its own schools, post offices, and other tax-supported facilities; in fact, most small towns would not be able to support them on their own, anyway. On the other hand, the former villages that make up the merger townships lose their political and economic voices. Economic decisions that might benefit the merger in the short term, such as the erection of an Aeon Mall, threaten local businesses and the sense of regional identity.

According to an interviews with Yano-san, preserving local identity is of utmost importance to Ugo, which is why it opted out of joining the Yuzawa merger in the late 1990s. As

[275] Worth noting is that the Wal-Mart corporation actually does exist in Japan, notably as a chain of supermarkets in the Kanto region (home to Tokyo) called Seiyu.

for *how*, the tourism generated by Nishimonai has brought enough revenue to Ugo to keep the town financially independent. Curious about the way those actively protecting this music and dance approach marketing Nishimonai as a tourist industry, I asked Yano-san about the struggles facing Ugo's local economy. He replied: que"I'd say we have about eight, maybe ten years left. *Gappei* is inevitable, but until then we can try to stay afloat, and the festival is by far our biggest source of revenue."[276] Indeed, the streets of the downtown Nishimonai, lined with its struggling small businesses and restaurants – and plenty of political posters in support of Abe and the LDP – are those of a ghost town, haunted not so much by the past so much but instead by anxieties about the future: about whether Ugo can remain independent, and whether this way of life – struggling though it may be – can survive.

At the same time, Ugo's negotiations with the encroaching forces of capitalism have put Nishimonai in a difficult position: the festival has become both an object of loss *and* the cash cow that protects the town from loss to begin with. Indeed, the uncertain future of Ugo, dependent on the revenue generated by the festival, amounts to nothing short of a local identity crisis. On the one hand, Yano-san seems hopeful about the festival's future and, as mentioned, believes that the key is to get younger generations interested through contemporary arrangements and collaboration with local musicians. Through their willingness to pass on their knowledge, the dancers who took me under their wing – particularly S-san – similarly demonstrated a belief that the future of this music and dance is determined by

[276] Interview, Yano Eitaro, Ugo, Akita Prefecture, February 2015.

whoever is interested in it, Japanese or not.[277] When I asked S-san and N-san about what got them interested in the dance, they remarked: "For one, it's just so beautiful. And that beauty is something that is being lost… it's a Japanese aesthetic that is simply vanishing today, so to be able to participate is a unique way to feel beautiful."[278]

Worth noting is that, while my non-Japaneseness never seriously hindered my access to the dance through S- and N-san, there are those who seem interested in protecting this music under the strict guise of Japanese heritage – and, as much as possible, for Japanese people only. The head dance teacher of the Preservation Society cleverly avoided all of my numerous attempts to set up an interview, exchange emails, or even have an informal conversation after rehearsal over the span of nine months; although I can't be entirely sure, it also seemed that she tried to discourage me from dancing in the festival at all.[279] I found it interesting that I was treated rather coldly by her. As a young woman who grew to care about the performance and future of Nishimonai, I fit the profile of the Preservation Society's target audience to a T—except that I'm American.

On the other hand, it seems that, to some, something intangible is being lost as the festival becomes a bona-fide tourist industry—even if its target audience is primarily Japanese. In our interview in August of 2015, the teacher leading the Bon Odori Club at Nishimonai Junior High School confided:

[277] Although N-san admitted that it is *fushigi* (strange, mysterious) that a young woman from America cares about the festival and the issues facing the local economy, while many local youngsters show comparatively little interest. Conversation, August 17th, 2017.
[278] Conversation, Numakura-san, Yokote, Aktia prefecture, July 2015.
[279] Please see "The Dance Teacher" for specifics.

> It's great that there are more people coming to the festival. When I was a kid it was really just for the townspeople, but now we can share [this] heritage with anyone. But on the other hand… well, for instance, some of dancers wear the beautiful hand-placed, vintage silk kimonos (*hanui*), right? Those used to hold a special meaning—you either received it from someone, or you could order it from the shop in town after dancing in the festival for a number of years. The tourists who come to town [for the festival] seem to have taken an interest in them; they've become a top-seller (*yoku ureru*). And that's great for the local economy, I suppose, but… there just seems to be something lost. It's become mere fashion [*tada no fashon]*. But… nothing can be done, I guess (*shikata ga nai*).[280]

That intangible essence of the festival is its fundamentally spiritual aspect, not least because it is a Buddhist festival that connects ours with the afterworld. But even for a bon odori, insiders know that there's something special about it. While diligently practicing this dance with the DVD in my tiny apartment in Tokyo between the lessons up in Ugo, I had a major, sudden revelation: it occurred to me that the process of learning this dance was forcing me to abandon a habitus, which Bourdieu defines as a physical embodiment of social capital. It was a surprising process, emotional process reverse-engineering; by gradually embodying the gentle steps of *Ondo* and *Ganke*'s dances, I felt my body was being transported to a time where the Male Gaze never held power over women's bodies, or notions of beauty and even sexuality. It was a totally different way of relating to my body that allowed me to recognize the extent I had unwittingly embodied the capitalist aesthetic, and its ceaseless commodification of what I came to recognize as the sacred space inside me that this dance helped grow. I shared these thoughts with Yano-san, and received a surprising response.

> I heard quite a story about a dancer from a while back.
>
> Sometime in the night, as she was diligently absorbed [*isshoukenmei* 一生懸命] in the dancing, she suddenly had an experience not quite like her body was moving beyond her intent, but rather that someone (or something) else was gently moving her body. Duringn that time, she realized: "Ohh [*aa* ああ], my ancestors are with me in my body, and we're here dancing together… that my body, as one with my ancestors, transcended history altogether [その祖先と歴史を飛び越えて一体になってる]." And when she had that thought, tears of happiness courageously came from her eyes. This happened toward the end of *Ganke*, during the refrain.
> I wonder, is this not the central question when it comes to Nishimonai? Like I told you before, Nishimonai isn't just a festival, but rather a sacred ceremony… and because so many of us who have participated in this dance have had such strange experiences, I can't help but wonder if there really is something otherworldly about it.[281]
>
> Indeed, two years ago was a trying personal time with a member of my family, with

[280] Anonymous, interview, Nishimonai Junior High School, Ugo, Akita prefecture, August 2015.
[281] Email, Yano-san, 7/16/2015.

whom I had temporarily cut off contact. During that time, an uncle on that side of the family became terminally ill, and I was worried about what would happen when he passed away—I wasn't ready to see this family member, which would be necessitated if I had to go to a funeral. When I went to Japan that summer to dance in the festival, that's when I heard the news—and because I was in Ugo, there was no way I could attend the funeral (and no one in my family could have begrudged me that). How mysterious it is that it happened this way—more beautifully and fittingly than anything I could have planned myself. I was even able to pay respects through the dance that very night.

Conclusion: "Tradition" as Timeless/Timelessness as Resistance

This leads back to a question considered earlier in this chapter: what, exactly, is being transmitted as the music and dance is passed on? Is Nishimonai being preserved, or (re)invented – and does this distinction matter? Links with ancestors beside, perhaps the world of Nishimonai is not necessarily of the past, but one that transcends time altogether. Recalling Sakai's idea that claiming the language of the past as "Japanese" projects the contemporary political project of creating a "Japanese heritage," claims that Nishimonai is "local heritage" are not only erroneous, but ironically demonstrate the uniquely late-modern crisis of identity that Anthony Giddens describes in *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*:

> Self-identity becomes problematic in modernity in a way which contrasts with self-society relations in more traditional contexts, yet this is not only a situation of loss, and it does not simply mean either that anxiety levels necessarily increase… What to do? How to act? Who to be? These are the focal questions for everyone living in

> circumstances of late modernity – and ones which, on some level or another, all of us answer, either discursively or through day-to-day social behavior.[282]

In other words, the quest for identity in the first place is a byproduct of postmodernity—itself an extension of late capitalism.

In passing on this music, then, an aesthetic reality that differs from the capitalist aesthetic is transferred, along with the dance steps. This is an important point to make in response to traditional Japanese music discourse, which so often focuses on the structure of the music and dance, rather than what rogue ethnomusicologist Charles Keil calls its "engendered feeling." In his essay "Motion and Feeling through Music," he writes,

> When [syntactical analysis] and the corresponding evaluative criteria are applied to non-Western styles or to Western compositions *in performance*, we often find that something in it is missing… in addition to the embodied meanings we must talk about characteristics of the ongoing musical process that can be subsumed under the general heading of 'engendered feeling.'[283]

But where do these engendered feelings originate? Is it the same feeling that's passed down from one generation of musicians to another? Based on my experiences dancing in Nishimonai and getting to know the community, I conclude that the engendered feeling here is fluid and contextual. Given the financial pressures currently facing Ugo and the dueling responsibilities of the festival to both symbolize and protect the community, I have attempted to show in this chapter that the *practice and performance* of Nishimonai in contemporary times enact resistance. I leave "resistance" purposefully vague here, because the festival means different things to different performers: for some, it represents economic stability, for others

[282] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 34, 37.
[283] Charles Keil, "Motion and Feeling through Music," in *Music Grooves: Essays and Dialogues* (Tucson, Arizona: Fenestra, 2005), 54.

beauty, for others still tradition and even nationhood. But regardless of its conception, the other-worldly aesthetic of Nishimonai brings everyone who participates into a single community: one that leaves the sonic and corporeal present to dance together in an (accidentally) alternate world far from the capitalist reality.

And one where spirits and specters of all kinds intermingle with us mere mortals.

The Dance Teacher

For Pat

It took some time before I figured it out, but the message was still loud and clear: the head dance teacher in the Nishimonai Preservation Society didn't exactly to want me to dance in the festival.

… maybe. This is Japan. Who knows what she was *really* thinking under the *tatemae* 建前 mask?

As with many Japanese confrontations, her tactics were very subtle and could be infinitely interpreted. It takes a lot of humility and many years in Japan to learn to sacrifice ego and accept that even – and perhaps especially -- the sweetest compliment could mean just the opposite. That said, the gestures of encouragement offered by the Dance Teacher also seemed to be laced with the biting assumption that I would be too ignorant to understand the *real* message. How do I know this for sure? I don't, and I may not ever, but I *can* say that our interactions always left me feeling embarrassed and sort of bad about myself.

So, with the jury still out on what she actually felt about me dancing in the festival for not one but now three years and counting, I present to the reader a collection evidence which, despite ostensible helpfulness, shows that the Dance Teacher wanted me out of there.

Exhibit A: The Hustling

After the first monthly dance rehearsal held from January to August at the Preservation Society building in Ugo, I introduced myself to her, bowing to an appropriate depth and politely offering my business card with both hands, in Japanese fashion.

"Hello, my name is Jillian Marshall, and I'm a PhD student from Cornell University in the USA. I'm writing a dissertation on music and society in Japan, and am interested in this festival as an example of traditional music's place in contemporary society. I first saw the festival last year, and it seems very special. I will be coming to Ugo every month for rehearsals, so if it is not an inconvenience, perhaps we can chat sometime? I'd like to know about your experience dancing in the festival and teaching the steps."

Nice! I told myself. *Direct, but not overly so. To-the-point, but respectful. Open ethnographic sesame!*

Unexpectedly, she turned sour; it was only for a brief moment, but the shift was palatable. She looked like she had just swallowed a tablespoon of baking soda. After gathering her thoughts for a moment, she sweetly replied:

"Oh, if you're curious about the festival, why don't you look at the brochures in the atrium? They're 600 yen."

The brochure? That's basic! Reading the brochure and calling it a day isn't exactly great research methodology... surely she knows that. Is she insinuating that I'm not a serious researcher or something? Is this a dig at my intelligence? In any case, I already picked up brochures in both English and Japanese on my research trip out here last year, and they are most certainly not 600 yen—they're free.

"Oh, and the first thing you should do is buy the instructional DVD so you can practice dancing between lessons every month, as you'll need it."

Ouch, but I get it. Hey, this thing is 40 dollars… is she trying to get as much money out of me as she can? What's she really saying?

In the end, I did purchase the DVD, and it actually turned out to be crucial in learning the steps. But as far as I know, she didn't insist to any of the other novices that they should buy the DVD before moving forward.

Exhibit B: The Sandals

"Oh, if you want to practice dancing seriously, you'll need the *zouri* 草履 (straw sandals). But… (giggle) I'm not sure if your size is available. The shop only carries up to extra-large."

... um… that wasn't necessary, but okay, whatever.

"Haha, how embarrassing for me! Extra-large should be fine."

But after this dig, she escorted me through the snow to a disorganized little souvenir shop around the corner from the Preservation Society Hall. Mixed message much? There, a man who seemed much more enthusiastic about me dancing in the festival, asking questions and so forth, happily sold me a pair of extra-large sandals.

They fit just right – but I still wasn't sure if the point of what happened was to bring me one step (pun intended) closer to dancing, or to actually discourage me altogether by attempting to make me feel insecure over my giant and disgusting ogre gaijin feet.

Exhibit C: Missed Connections

I travelled monthly from Tokyo to Akita for the dance rehearsals, and asked if we could find a chance to meet after the first two rehearsals with evasive responses both times: "Oh, you should talk to Yano-san from the sister Preservation Society, Kita no Bon. Oh, you already have? Ok then." In subsequent lessons we ended up having no interaction at all except for an obligatory 会釈 *eshaku* nod-bow at the start of rehearsals.

In the spirit of ethnographic detective work, I decided to ask Yano-san about the Dance Teacher in one of our email correspondences, which had begun months before she had rerouted me to him. How long has she been dancing? When did she start working with the Preservation Society? Do you think she might be willing to chat with me?

And, in the equally important spirit of intuiting when to just drop it, I learned from the total lack of acknowledgement of these questions in his response that, when a Japanese person doesn't want to talk about something, he or she might just act as if you had never brought it up at all.

Coincidence? I think not.

Exhibit D: Spider Legs

The last two dance rehearsals leading up to the August *honban* 本番 main festival are held at the nearby Community Center, which boasts a larger space to accommodate the increased attendance, as well live performances of the dance's two songs (*Ondo* and *Ganke*) to get everyone excited. Many of the attendees for these later rehearsals are from distant cities of

Sendai or even Tokyo who learn the dances remotely as part of a larger hobby of dancing in *bon odori* around the archipelago. But because they don't come to the monthly rehearsals, they're something of outsiders – not part of the community, and dancing with a mechanical rigidity rather than with spiritual focus.

It was an interesting moment: the only gaijin in the room was more of an insider than some of the Japanese people.

That said, by the rehearsal in June I had experienced a series of revelations regarding these dances. The movements are simple and slow, but require intense concentration to execute properly. The best dancers look as though they're floating on clouds, moving effortlessly. While I hadn't (and haven't) yet achieved that level of fluency, I had become increasingly aware of my body, the rhythm, and the importance of quieting my mind to focus on *feeling* while dancing. This dance, I realized, was redefining my relationship to my body, as well as to the idea of dancing. The male gaze certainly had no part in determining these dance steps! And since I had been attending every rehearsal since the winter, the locals – who treated me like a bonafide Akitan once these strange people from Sendai invaded the space -- noticed my progress, particularly three veteran dancers in their sixties and seventies, effectively Fairy Godmothers, that adopted me as their *kouhai* 後輩 junior protégé after that first rehearsal when they asked, jokingly yet seriously, "Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

After the June rehearsal, the Fairy Godmothers dancers rushed up to share rare words of praise.

- That was really beautiful! Once you make sure that you keep your hands at eye level on *Ondo*, it'll be almost good to go!
- You didn't miss a single step in *Ganke*. Very impressive!

Some locals chimed in, too:

- You've really made progress! You're doing it better than we are!
- Wow, you look Japanese!![284]

Feeling a bit more confident, and seeking as much feedback as possible in preparation for the festival, I decided to approach the Dance Teacher to ask what she thought.

"Well, it's looking OK, but you take giant steps like this. (stomps legs) They have to be delicate and smooth. But because you're so *big* and have legs that look like a spider's (giggle), it looks a bit… strange (giggle)."

…

Okie dokie, then.

Arg!! Is anyone *telling me the truth?*

Exhibit E: The Yukata

During this same interaction, I asked her about protocol in the *honban*. I had heard that you need permission to dance—was that true? And if so, might I be able to dance? What should I wear? Do I have to buy the gorgeous, but extremely expensive kimono made of hand-placed, vintage silk from kimono used in the festival hundreds of years ago that the veteran dancers

[284] Possibly the highest compliment from a Japanese person.

wear, or can I wear a *yukata* 浴衣 cotton summer kimono that I've seen others don the night of the festival?

"Oh, you can dance in the *honban*, but you would want to wear a silk kimono. Sometimes we can loan them out if we know the person, but since you're so *tall* you'd have to get one custom made. That would probably cost… oh, on the cheaper side, around 300,000 yen.[285] And they take six months to make."

Excited that I was apparently allowed to dance in the *honban*, but devastated that I couldn't afford to get the kimono and that it wouldn't have been made in time anyway, I asked my Fairy Godmothers what to do.

Slightly taken aback by the misinformation I was given, they defensively informed me that you most certainly *can* wear a *yukata*, and that, while I'd still probably have to get it custom made, they could get me a deal where it would only cost 30,000 yen.[286] And I could wear it for years.

So the next month, they took me to a kimono shop where one of them used to work and graciously hooked me up with a beautiful purple *yukata*, complete with the red lining required for it to be deemed festival-ready. And then played dress-up for a few hours, putting different silk *kimono* on me just to see what they'd look like while cooing, taking pictures, and laughing at me – playfully, anyway.

[285] Around $3000.
[286] Around $300.

Exhibit F: The Classroom Observation

In my correspondence with Yano-san, as well as talking with a friend who worked as an Assistant English Language Teacher at Nishimonai Junior High School in downtown Ugo for four years, I learned that the Preservation Society runs a temporary *bukatsu* 部活 club activity specifically for teaching interested students the Nishimonai dance or music, called the 盆踊り *bon odori* club. Although most kids in the area know the basic steps simply through osmosis – the assistant teacher of the *bon odori* club told me that it's very likely their parents or other relatives have danced in the festival at least once – I was curious to see how this tradition, which the Preservation Society believes is an important facet of local identity, is passed on to children. I was also curious to see if the pedagogical approach would be different in the setting of a junior high school.

So, I emailed the school and arranged to meet with the vice principle, as well as observe a class of the *bon odori* club. I took a series of *shinkansen* up – this time from Kyoto, where I was crashing with DJ friends – totaling over eight hours one-way of travel. I walked to the school after taking a bus to the center of town, and felt waves of nostalgia wash over me as I walked into the school. The shoe boxes! The chimes! The calligraphy hung in the 玄関 *genkan* entranceway! Working as an ALT down on Awaji Island six years prior, I would have never imagined that I'd someday be slipping my feet into the brown guest slippers and being spoken

to in *son-keigo* 尊敬語 – the most polite form of Japanese -- by the vice principal of a middle school, escorted to the meeting room, and given iced coffee by the tea lady.[287]

Indeed, when I worked at the junior high school, the tea lady wouldn't even wash my cup because I'm a woman and should "do it myself." Which I did, and wouldn't have minded doing if it weren't that I was the only woman that she told that to.

Sigh.

Anyway, it turned out that the vice principal had some business to attend to, so I chatted with the assistant teacher of the *bon odori* club who worked under the teachers from the Preservation Society who volunteered their time to instruct the children on how to play the drums, flutes, and *shamisen*, and of course, dance the steps. After learning that interested kids from the entire region join the club, that the community considers teaching the dance in school one of the most important steps they can take in ensuring the festival's continued relevance, and that she is personally worried that the increase in tourism is taking away from Nishimonai's sacred atmosphere,[288] she took me upstairs to observe the class.

[287] A tea lady is a woman hired to work in a school (and other places of business) to serve tea to the teachers and guests, wash the cups, and prepare *kyuushoku* 給食 school lunch for the teachers. That said, Japanese schools don't have cafeterias and lunch ladies. Instead, school lunch is delivered to the school each day from a center that prepares the food in bulk for the school district, and the students themselves prepare the food and eat in their classrooms under the supervision of their homeroom teacher; teachers without a homeroom eat in the staff room. I was always amazed at the discipline of Japanese kids when it came to school lunch. If American kids were given that responsibility, there'd be food fights every day, someone would get sued, and the whole thing would become a national news sensation.

[288] Conversation, August 2015

Of course. I should have known. How could it not have been? It was none other than the Dance Teacher who volunteered from the Preservation Society to teach in the *bon odori* club.

When the teacher I chatted with introduced me to the class as I bowed and cringed, internally willing for the attention to be appropriately shifted away from the gaijin and back to the children, the Dance Teacher and I made brief eye contact. To this day I can't be too sure, but I detected something close to a – gasp – smile! Much like a shooting star streaking brilliantly through the night sky, it was over nearly as soon as it appeared: she quickly averted her gaze, as if coming to her senses, and busied herself with concern for the children.

At some point in the class when the kids were busy practicing the steps, I approached the Dance Teacher, bowed, and said an appropriate nicety. Other than giggling nervously, she didn't say anything. And for the rest of the class, she ignored me so effectively it was as though I weren't there at all.

But in that golden moment where she smiled and made direct eye-contact with me, I sensed a curious mixture of surprise, and something faintly resembling respect. That she perhaps was beginning to see that it takes tremendous effort to make a 16-hour round-trip journey to observe an hour-long rehearsal; that it takes a foolhardy dedication to get in contact with everyone who I think could know about the festival and its meaning in the community, especially when there have been blocks; that, by the graces of friends in the area and my three Fairy Godmothers, I could find out about this class in the first place. That my very un-Japaneseness is paradoxically the only way that I could humbly, if intensively, pursue learning about this festival.

Exhibit G: The Honban

My Fairy Godmothers came to the *ryokan* 旅館, complete with *tatami* straw mats and *shoji* paper screens, down by the mountains, to meet us. They looked gorgeous in their *kimono* – they wear the beautiful silk versions out of the range of my student budget -- and full make-up; their hair was tucked away with intricate braids so as to not poke out from under their hats. I, as per their instruction, hadn't started getting dressed, not least because I didn't -- and to this day -- still don't know how to put on a *yukata*. Does the left side go over the right, or is it the other way? One of the styles is only worn at funerals, and I don't want to offend anyone by doing it the wrong way… so, they helped me with everything, even my hair. My mother and step father, who had come from the U.S. to see the festival, remarked that it was like watching four women get ready for prom. After around half an hour of tucking, tugging, squeezing, pulling, and pinning, they had suited me up and we were ready to go.

After all these months, the night of dancing was finally upon us.

And I was nervous!

Arriving in Ugo by car twenty minutes later, we parked at the Community Center, hydrated, and headed out to the main street in town, where the dancing takes place alongside woven steel urns ablaze with fresh Akita cedar. The singers, drummers, *shamisen* lute players and bamboo flutists -- dressed in standard festival gear of *yukata* and *tenugui* towels wrapped around their heads to catch the sweat -- play from the balcony of the Preservation Society building right in the center of town. They're loud on their own, but there is light amplification to

ensure that dancers at the far end of the street, as well as the thousands of people sitting in bleachers, standing along the streets, or sitting on tarps in the otherwise ghost town of Ugo, can hear the music.

Ha. Two years ago, I came here for the first time and gazed in awe at this beautiful, mysterious, deceptively difficult dance; a year ago I promised myself I'd learn it; and here I am tonight…

The first hour or so of the festival is when the local children, who learn the steps in school in the *bon odori* club or from their relatives, get their chance to perform and set the overall atmosphere for the festival. This is when people eat the street foods like smelt-on-a-stick, drink and chat on tarps, find their assigned spots in the ticket-only bleacher seats, browse the kiosks selling knick-knacks ranging from towels to lanterns emblazoned with graphics of iconic poses in the dance, or sample local sake. After a short break, the drums beat a rhythm signaling the beginning of the second, serious dance, where the veterans and others who (in theory) practiced hard perform. This procession is the one that all of these people descending upon Ugo these three nights in August come to see.

And with a call from the announcer over the PA system, the dance officially begins.

After I hooked up my mother and step father with some food and beverage, the Fairy Godmothers escorted me to the very end of the street, where dancers enter the procession. I was to dance between two of them so that I could follow the moves from behind, and could be taken care of in case of an emergency (shoe pops off, mask comes undone, *yukata* drags, what

have you) from behind.

Here we go!

As we entered the procession, I coached myself. *I've got this! I worked hard, and I clearly deserve to be here, even though I'm not Japanese or whatever. It's going to go well, and I'm going to make the most of this experience.* Interestingly, at this same time, a few Japanese male dancers were exiting who were clearly from out of town: their movements were exaggerated, unfocused, and obviously under-practiced, and their sloppy *yukata* weren't the standard colors. The big give-away that they were out-of-towners, though, was that they were raging drunk.

Stumbling through the steps, they shouted at each other and gaudily interacted with the audience with attention-seeking poses and gestures, completely disregarding the fundamentally spiritual element of the festival that one can only learn by spending time in Ugo. It was embarrassing to watch, and I knew that if I behaved even remotely similarly, I'd probably be personally escorted out of the procession and banned from dancing in future festivals. But because they were Japanese, we all just turned the other cheek without mention.

Had she seen this, I wonder what the Dance Teacher would have thought.

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Ondo is performed on loop for the first half hour or so. It took a few rotations before my self-consciousness began to wane, but soon I found myself in a kind of trance-state. The song, repeated dozens of times, didn't grow stale; instead, I became deeply engaged with the rhythms and melody, uniting with it like breath. I felt increasingly connected with the

procession on whole – less like an individual and more like a link in a long chain: hundreds of dancers all moving as one.

It was also *hot*. The dance is slow enough that it takes several rotations to get past areas where there's blazing fire. And even if Nishimonai is way up north in Akita, it's still August in Japan: inescapably hot, muggy, and *sweaty*.

There are a few exit points in the procession, and we took one which would lead us directly to vending machines where we could buy – and promptly chug – water. Lifting up my mask to imbibe, there were gasps from nearby watchers.

- あれ？外人だ！(What? She's a foreigner!)
- 外人さんが参加できるの？知らなかったー (Foreigners can participate? I didn't know that!)

Even before I revealed my true identity by literally lifting the mask, I had heard similar deliberations from the audience while dancing:

- Wow, that dancer sure is tall. I wonder if she's a gaijin?
- But why would a gaijin dance in this festival? How would she learn it?
- I guess you're right… but her legs are so long. And look, her feet are so big! Haha!
- Yes, but the dancing's not bad. It's clear that she's practiced. She *must* be Japanese.
- Strange, but I suppose you're right… WAIT! LOOK! Is that blonde hair coming out from under the mask??
- やっぱり![289] She *is* a gaijin!

Had she heard this, I wonder what the Dance Teacher would have thought.

Conclusions: A Counterargument

[289] *Yappari*, meaning "as expected." It can also mean just the opposite, depending on context. In this situation, however, it's safe to say that suspicions were confirmed.

Again, I may never know what the Dance Teacher thought of me being there. And it mostly doesn't matter, because I am confident in the integrity of my actions and made real relationships with people in Akita as a result of working hard to learn the dance. Plus, it's healthier to let go of worrying about what other people think than to catastrophize worst-case scenarios. Nonetheless, even though it stung to never have won her outright approval (although that surprised smile during the classroom observation can't be discounted), I can understand where she was coming from.

Here comes this walking caricature of an American, bopping along with her blonde hair and her blue eyes and her toothy smile, and her mission. She likes Japan, and she wants to learn about this tiny pocket untouched by the rampant Americanization present in the rest of Japan! Tee hee! But as a child, the Dance Teacher endured life in the Empire resisting the Western Barbarians and suffered through the Pacific War, when the Americans with their blonde hair and their blue eyes and their toothy smiles, and their mission, were dropping nuclear bombs on civilians, children, and animals. And later driving around in Jeeps, telling the naughty Japanese how to be a proper nation state with bubble gum disregard for a society that has existed for thousands of years, all while foisting upon them this thing called global capitalism: the very apparatus that threatens Nishimonai's existence today. Even now, it's still the Americans who come to Japan and get too drunk and too loud on vacation, commit hopeless social faux pas like walking into a house without taking off their shoes, and commit crimes on military bases that sprawl throughout the archipelago.

She has every reason to not trust me.

And how sickeningly ironic it is that it's an American conducting a research project asking the same questions about this festival that the dancers and festival organizers and local school teachers are asking themselves. Is it not topsy-turvy that an American has tapped into this struggle, and is just as concerned about the uniformity sprawling in the wake of globalization – Westernization – as an older generation of Japanese, who recognize less and less the country they call home? It's simply absurd that the American was more often than not the only dancer younger than middle age in the rehearsals,[290] while the young people of Ugo don't show much interest in it beyond obligation, much less the dedication to come to rehearsal every month, much *less* from Tokyo.

How can it be that this is the world we live in?

I'm not sure either, but it is what it is. And with the humility that I have learned by spending time in Japan in the first place, I accept that.

[290] It should be noted that other foreign twenty-somethings sometimes joined the rehearsals. From chatting with them, I learned that they were mostly Assistant English Language Teachers (ALTs) living in the area who wanted to connect with local culture; in one instance, an ALT brought a friend visiting from the US to give her an "authentic" Japanese experience. These examples only underscore my point.

Aesthetics of Capitalism (Part II)

For Mikey

Last Train/First Train

Typically anywhere from twelve thirty to sometime past 1am in Tokyo; in Osaka and Kyoto it's a bit earlier, maybe around midnight. It'll probably be packed: along with rush hour, last train is when you might see the station workers wielding giant slabs of (what appears to be) cardboard to shove as many people into the train car as possible. Riders may find themselves squeezed so tightly against one another that their feet no longer touch the floor.

The train will also be loud—comparatively, anyway. It's probably safe to say that Japanese trains will always be quieter when compared to, say, New York's, where people listen to music without headphones, sing, hustle, get into arguments, and shout across the cars; Japanese trains are serenely quiet, perhaps uncannily so, and it's safe to say that most riders are considerate of their fellow passengers by keeping to themselves.[291] In contrast to daytime train etiquette, which encourages passengers to be nearly entirely silent, the last train is quite rambunctious. You will likely overhear people's conversations, flowing a little looser with the

[291] The exception to this general rule, however, is culture of 痴漢 *chikan*: the non-consensual groping of women in crowded trains that is something of an epidemic in Japan. One of the most successful measures taken to reduce incidents of *chikan* has been the implementation of women-only train cars, which are usually demarcated with pink platform markings and stickers with flowers on the train car doors. It should be pointed out, though, that *chikan* is not a Japan-specific problem; in recent years, New York City subway cars have hung signs reminding passengers that the inappropriate touching of women is, indeed, a harassment (surprise!), and to speak up if an incident is spotted.

help of alcohol, and some downright guffaws from groups of businessmen, or young women on their way home after a *joshikai* 女子会(girl's night out).

If you're in Tokyo, the men riding last trains are likely in suits. They were either out at a company business party, getting drunk as an obligation to their superiors, or staying late at the office to get more work done, or to show their dedication to the company by going home only after all of their *senpai* 先輩 (superiors) have left. These souls look worn-out and defeated, not least because many of them will return to work early the next morning to repeat the same cycle day after day, month after month. Many of the women will be too, but you'll also see them decked out in dresses, heels, pearls, and with immaculate hair-dos, and clutching expensive designer bags. Or they might be donning a more daring ギャル *gyaru* style: an intentionally, somewhat grotesquely dark tanning job, bleached hair, fake eyelashes, thick eye- and lip-liner, and miraculously short skirts worn with dauntingly high heels. If you're in Osaka, it's much more a mixed bag. The men might look like they work at a host club,[292] with spiky *anime*-like hair, long collared and brightly colored shirts, and pointy leather shoes, or more country-punk, wearing sweatpants and baggy t-shirts with mops of bleached hair. And you'll see a fair number of *gyaru* in Osaka, too, along with old ladies wearing mismatched sweatpants and t-shirts with grammatically bizarre English sporting permed, purple hair-dos.

[292] A host club is where women pay highly inflated prices to enter and drink at a pub where attractive servers flirt with customers. Of course, there are also hostess clubs with reversed gender duties, as well as maid cafes, where the waitresses are dressed up as (surprise!) French maids.

The stations will be crowded, with hoards of people rushing to make their transfers to spare the crippling expense of a taxi ride.[293] On the staircase you might also see men in suits, this time sprawled supine over several steps because they're too drunk to stand. You might even see vomit -- an unexpected similarity with New York's subways!

While the trains can seem lonely during the day, eerily soundtracked by those "happy happy!" jingles (in Tokyo, at least), last train just feels different. It's a party of sorts -- last train is alive!

--

In Tokyo, usually sometime between 4:15 and 5am; a bit later in Osaka and Kyoto, maybe sometime between 5 and 6. Unlike last train, first train isn't usually crowded. In fact, it's actually sparsely ridden, uncannily so in some of the most densely packed metropolitan areas on the planet. Similar to last train, though, first train is a fascinating microcosm of Japanese society – only without the crowds. Indeed, observers might be able to more clearly focus on the case studies, as there's usually only a few from each societal niche.

Of course, you'll see the businessmen and women who have an early meeting, a 出張 *shucchou* business trip, extra 残業 *zangyou* to finish up from the night before, a daily multiple-hour commute to the office that requires a ridiculously early start – surprisingly common in Tokyo, where rents in the city center are prohibitively high for many *sarariimen* -- or some other sense of duty that has compelled them to rise before the sun breaks the horizon. Then

[293] Japan's taxis are some of the most expensive in the world.

you'll see the people who partied all night, themselves falling into different categories: there's the Shibuya crowd, who are likely the *gyaru* you saw riding last train except with their meticulous makeup now smeared, or with sunglasses shielding viewers from out-of-place false eyelashes. Then you might see some people who were at an experimental music club: reeking of cigarette smoke even if they didn't partake, maybe coming down from some kind of drug—and perhaps also wearing sunglasses to cover up blood-shot eyes. While the Shibuya club-goers might be in high heels and tube tops, the underground people will more likely be in t-shirts and hemp, draw-string pants. You might even see a foreigner thrown into the mix: a family of tourists who needs to catch an early shinkansen to their next destination, perhaps, or some twenty-something guys who hit up the clubs themselves.

Or a closeted DJ who masquerades as a foreign graduate student.

No matter who they are or where they came from, though, people on first train look equally strung out. First train is perhaps the one time in Japan where individuals living entirely different lives find themselves together in the same social space, and are indeed equalized by their shared presence: whether you stayed up all night or had to get up early, 4:30am is still 4:30am. But you can nearly always get a seat – or even two, because it's so early, everyone understands that you might need to break the rules and catnap across two seats before your stop. They're probably doing it themselves.

After all, you have to *earn* first train. A little rebellion is just par for the course.

Chapter 3: Underground Music

For Nishisaka Masayuki

Noise in Tokyo… it's everywhere, and it's inescapable. The trains are already whirring when you wake up. Depending on how close your apartment is to the line, you can even hear the train station jingle from your bed; depending on how thin your walls are, you might have heard your neighbor snoring all night! Since your kitchen is basically in your *genkan* shoe-area and only has one burner that takes forever to make anything with, you head to the *konbini* convenience store to pick up an *onigiri* rice ball for breakfast and maybe a cup of hot coffee most of them sell now for 100 yen.[294] The door beeps when the glass doors automatically open for you, and the staff shout *irasshaimase!!!* in a saccharine voice that belies a misery that, in all likelihood, mirrors your own. And yet we're all trying so hard to look happy… When you're checking out, they narrate each purchase in that same voice – "Rice ball, 129 yen! Hot coffee, S-size, 100yen! Here is your receipt! Thank you very much for coming to our store!" Meanwhile, you're blocking it all out because it's just a *little* too loud, you know?

Soon you're at the station, ready to go to your job or maybe just get out of your tiny, tiny apartment where you hit your head on all the doors. The people working at the station shopping mall are all shouting *irasshaimase* at the tops of their lungs, along with the deals of the day. If you're at a big station like Shinagawa, Tokyo, Shibuya, or Shinjuku, all the train station jingles are playing at once now, each with a melody more manically happy than the

[294] This is one area of Americanization that I'm A-OK with. When it comes to coffee, sometimes *more* is more – the words of a latter-stage PhD student if there ever were any.

next. *The Chuo Line Rapid Service will soon be arriving on Track 14! Passengers bound for Okubo, Higashi Nakano, and Koenji, please take the Local Service line on Track 13! The Shonan Shinjuku Line, bound for Atami, will soon be arriving on Track 2!* After the automated announcers come on with arrivals, departures, and warnings to stand behind the yellow line and to be careful, the attendants in the station pipe in with their own announcements -- which are basically the exact same thing, except louder. *Then* the attendants working on the platform itself yell at you to line up – behind the yellow line, of course – and to be careful!

The train is coming!!

You can probably grab a seat if it's not rush hour, and depending on the line – but all bets are off on the Yamanote and Chuo lines, no matter the time of day. If it *is* rush hour, you'll probably be packed in so tight that your feet aren't touching the ground. *Do-a ga shimarimasu! Gochuui kudasai!!*[295]Oddly, the inside of the car is usually pleasantly quiet, with only that lolling train whir to keep you company, because Japanese etiquette discourages people from making sound in enclosed spaces.[296] That, and people are too absorbed in their smart phones – and occasionally books, more so in Tokyo than in other places—to want to engage with the world around them anyway! After a few restfully quiet minutes, the announcements start up again: *mamonaku, Ichigaya. Ichigaya desu. Migi-gawa no tobida ga hirakimasu. Gochuui kudasai.* Then the English announcement comes on, which is pronounced in an exa415erated accent to make sure that the message gets through: "The next station is, IIIchiGAAAAya. Doors open on

[295] "Doors closing! Please be careful!"

[296] Someone PLEASE tell this to all the passengers on the Shortline from New York City to Ithaca. That, and to not eat chili, curry, or any other stewed item inside the bus…

the right at IIIchiGAAAya." Or, "The next station is NaKAAAAno. Doors open on the left, at NaKAAAAAAno."

Thanks for that! It really made all the difference-- or reinforced difference, anyway…

Then you get off and it's another shopping mall, or sometimes *multiple* malls, and if you don't know exactly where your exit is you'll be trapped, spending forty-five minutes trying to get back to the other side of the station (I'm lookin' at you, Shinjuku). Even if it's a smaller station there's probably some guy standing right outside the gates screaming *irasshaimase!* while trying to hand out *uchiwa* paper fans or tissue packets for the karaoke booth or drug store he's hocking for (I'm lookin' at you, Koenji). Finally on the street, you get to hear the automated bird-tweet sounds that play at the crosswalk, advertisement trucks that drive around telling you to listen to so-and-so-'s latest J-pop release, political party trucks that drive around telling you who to vote for, little kids screaming because they're not old enough yet to learn about not disturbing the *fuinki* (social atmosphere), and more people shouting *irasshaimase* until you're ready to crawl back into the womb because you *just can't take it anymore*!

If you're lucky, your commute home isn't disrupted by a *jinshinjikou* (passenger injury), which is most often a euphemism for jumpers: people who commit suicide by leaping in front of approaching trains. They happen all the time – daily, sometimes multiple times, and with alarming frequency at the start of the new fiscal year in springtime -- and everyone knows, but it doesn't seem to register… unless you have to change trains or it happened on *your* train, in which case it's a gross in convenience because you are now late. The evening rush starts at 4:30

and ends at around 8, so there's no way to avoid getting packed in, sometimes by a guy wielding a cardboard shield designed for this very purpose. You get off the it's back to the simultaneous announcements over loudspeakers, people advertising time sales, whatever—and you try to ignore it, feebly. When you do finally make it home, it's time to eat your crappy bento box you got for half-off before the supermarket closed and to zone out in front of your computer or phone, watching some video to block out the train whirs you still hear from inside your house.

It's lunatic, never stopping.

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I went to Tokyo on whim. It'd be a while that I'd actually spent time there not just out of necessity on my way in or out of Japan. The contract had ended at my place in Osaka, I have a place to stay whenever I'm in town, and there were some friends I wanted to see before leaving the country to finish up back at school. It made sense to make the trip up, originally just for three days, but I ended up extending it twice – although once was due to the fact that I (subconsciously, perhaps not so accidently) missed my bus out of town.

The truth is that I hadn't wanted to go to Tokyo. I thought I hated it. Two and half years prior, I had left in a big hurry for Osaka because I felt like I was going crazy. My tiny room in a share house in a slightly removed industrial part of the city felt so small with its paper-thin walls and two hoarder roommates—one of whom was home *all the time*, the other of whom spared no opportunity to point out mistakes in my Japanese, comment on by cooking or how *big* my feet are, tee-hee, or how "lucky" it must to have a schedule as *hima* (free, empty) as mine. The

building was filthy, with broken electronics and garbage strewn everywhere and stray cats lurking between tall weeds in the overgrown "picnic area." As much as I grew to resent these living conditions – which were rather far from the nearest station AND located next to a busy highway -- it took all I had somedays to leave the apartment… because if I went outside, I'd have to deal with the crowds, the bustle, the *noise* of Tokyo.

With no responsibilities other than the vague, abstract duty of "fieldwork," the boundary between work and personal time began to blur together. Since my routine mainly consisted of going to smoke-stinking basements in the middle of the night to see some angry dude bloop-blorp on a synthesizer while tripping on acid for the third time that week – or following a soulless pop media empire -- I ended up feeling alienated from most people.[297] After all, I *was* an outsider, and Tokyo spared no chance to remind me of that. No matter where I went, I was just another anonymous *gaijin* foreigner, battling off unwanted English menus at restaurants, listening to people talk about my appearance right in front of me under the assumption that I'd have no idea what they were saying, or feebly explaining to station attendants that I understand Japanese. My world became my thoughts, and I could barely sleep; I felt as though I was sleepwalking through my days. Eventually I began to wonder:

Do I even exist?

During a two-week trip to Osaka in the latter half of my fieldwork – similarly decided on a whim -- I instantly felt more relaxed. Perhaps because it is close to where I first lived in Japan,

[297] I also ran off to rural Akita prefecture once a month for Buddhist dance lessons, which an immensely refreshing and welcome change of pace. I'll play the "I grew up on a dirt road"- card here to counteract the risk of sounding like a yuppie in what I'm about to say: maybe the key to surviving in a major city is having escape route to the country.

Osaka is just easier for me to handle than the mind-bo415ling metropolis of Tokyo. My god… people make eye contact with you – people *smile*! They give you the time of day! The trains aren't nearly as crowded, and you don't even need them anyway because you can *bike* everywhere! The language is friendly and informal. There's so much more *space*! There are *trees* outside—*parks*! The cost of living is reasonable, and people are more laid-back… it's just easier there.

Since then, I've based myself in Osaka without looking back, taking excursions to wherever it is I need to go. I was able to build a life in Osaka in a way I couldn't while living in Tokyo, not least because the underground music scene – my people, my home in Japan -- was so welcoming. I didn't have to prove myself; I liked them, they liked me, and that was enough. This isn't to say that people *weren't* welcoming in Tokyo, but rather that Osaka is just less busy, and less pretentious. While some of the friendships I made in Tokyo that have proved to be the real deal three years later, the 20-20 vision of retrospect has gotten me to see just how hard some of those people were trying to be cool and/or make it big. No disrespect – Tokyo is a hard place to be a starving artist – but it was easy to feel lost amongst all that hustling, even though I knew it wasn't personal. It basically sort felt like middle school all over again: you might have a connection with someone, but if you're not able to provide social clout that'll make your new friend seem more relevant to the social-climbing, hip "party-people," well, then, *ja ne.*[298]

After laying down roots and establishing some *ibasho* (a place where one can always go and feel welcome and at home) in Osaka during my latest long-term stay in Japan, many of my

[298] See ya.

long-standing beefs with the country began to go away. OK, so there's no way around it—I'm going to keep having the conversation about where I'm from and how tall I am a million more times, so I might as well have fun with it. Someone who's never met me before comments on how "big" I am and thinks it's funny – I don't have feel bad about someone who doesn't understand that this is just rude. When is it ever OK to call a woman big in a society where being small and dainty is so highly prized?? Someone goes off on how Japanese food is, factually speaking, the best cuisine on the planet and that American food is terrible -- muster up some empathy to see where they're coming from, while disengaging and not taking it personally. For an isolated *shimaguni* (island nation) like Japan, it's probably difficult understand that the cuisine of America, a society of immigrants (current regime withstanding), includes food from around the world and isn't just corn dogs and ketchup. Fruits and vegetables are inordinately expensive – oh well, buy them anyway and really enjoy them. My apartment is miniscule and I hit my head constantly and am afraid to make any sounds because the walls are made out of paper mache-- go to a party to stomp and dance and stretch… get all that tension out with friends!

As this stability has come to replace what were once sore spots, and as my relationship with Japan has continued to evolve, I increasingly wondered if I could perhaps patch things up with Tokyo after our ugly break-up. After all, it was in Tokyo that I became absolutely enraptured by Japan to begin with—truly love at first sight, like a homecoming, as though I had been searching for this place my entire life without realizing it until I got there.[299] Sure, things

[299] Which was entirely by accident, as I describe in "Hate/Love."

got bad, but how could something that felt so true *really* be wrong? Was it possible that I had been too harsh, or had misinterpreted what was really going on? Armed with the impenetrable force-field of holding no expectations whatsoever – and two and a half years of distance -- I went to Shin-Osaka station and hopped on the first available shink (foreigner slang for the *shinkansen* bullet train) bound for Tokyo.

Yes, it was still noisy. But when I found myself with some friends at one of my old haunts, listening to some dude scream and throw himself on the ground while lighting an electric piano on fire and, later, bopping around to three guys hunched over analog synthesizers etching out post-industrial post-melodies over mixed-metered 808s while sampling a robotic voice that cooed "block your inbox,"[300] something clicked. Here I was, getting down to this music that I've… *missed*! And it isn't because there isn't a noise scene in Osaka, because there is. The issue is that there just isn't enough noise *itself* for this kind of music to really make sense there (with the exception of the nightmare that is the Bic Camera department store in Namba). In Osaka, noise feels conceptual, like feigned cosmopolitanism; it just doesn't match Osaka's happy-go-lucky, *nandeyanen!* (popular slang for a very loose translation of "whatever!/what the heck!/that's wack!") atmosphere, where people wear bedazzled sweat suits out and about and old ladies brag about the crazy-cheap bargains they scored at the local *shotengai* mom-and-pop shopping arcade. Perhaps that's why the underground scene there is so much lighter… lounges where anyone is welcome, no questions asked – even if you're in and out of jail due to your drug addiction, even if you're a suit five days a week and only rap on the

[300] I *feel* that!

weekends, even if you earn your money whipping businessmen at an S&M bar, even if you're a foreign graduate student. Just starting out? No problem – you can practice DJing free of charge (of course), and you know what, let's grab a drink so you can tell me about that dissertation your writing. Hey, who went out and bought the snacks for everyone to share? That was really nice. Let's do a special night of karaoke, where *everybody* gets to sing.[301] House music with positive messages of love and acceptance, albums produced and released entirely by friends, disco, Japanese pop from the 70's, or religious chants mixed with Louis Armstrong[302] – this is the vibe in Osaka… at least to me.

… whereas in Tokyo, I once saw a guy slam his face into a cymbal, break a piece of Plexiglas over his head, and throw himself on the ground as he was playing distorted Metallica records at maximum volume, all while taunting a bunch of sweaty dudes in a basement:

"This is too gentle for you, isn't it?"

But there I was, stomping and bopping, laughing, nearly euphoric, and totally feeling these guys playing what was, in actuality, some pretty dark music. And I wasn't the only one having a grand ol' time – it was a packed party, an anniversary special for a weekly show a friend has been putting together for a few years now. For a person who covers her ears when an ambulance goes by in the US (or when any of the busses in Ithaca do that totally unnecessary step-bus thing), how could I actually *enjoy* this abrasive music, in a grimy little basement no less? I mean, it was so loud that my ears felt like they were growing a coating of

[301] Saki-chan, you made the coolest MC/mama-chan for the night.
[302] Only you, Hayato.

fuzzy cotton from the inside out – a feeling I savored as I unexpectedly waxed nostalgic about temporary hearing loss.

Ah, the Tokyo days… they were actually pretty fun, weren't they?

The music was so dope, so cutting-edge– as was the animated video someone had put together playing on the projection screen that showed jack-hammers relentlessly pounding at a cyborg's head. It was shocking, perhaps most of all because it was so relatable – and it because I was hearing and seeing this all in Tokyo: the Concrete Jungle, the Mad City, the largest metropolitan area on the planet. In fact, this could only *really* happen in Tokyo, because it *is* Tokyo. And as I took the train home later that evening – sweaty, hair matted to my forehead, stinking of second-hand smoke, and probably freaking out the other passengers who were trying to stare at me Japanese-style (whenever they think I'm not looking while pretending I don't exist if I actually initiate eye contact) – I was happy, calm, and satisfied

… even though I had to transfer in Shinjuku.

Maybe the effort of trying to stay sane in Tokyo is the real entrance fee to a noise-y show—the dues one must first pay to connect to this music. During that year of fieldwork in Tokyo, would I have found this music to be as cathartic if I hadn't felt as alienated as I did? Interesting that, in Osaka, I never seek out these kinds of shows but in Tokyo it's an absolute necessity. Recklessly stomping and bopping in that little basement outside of Shinjuku is how I get out all those bundled-up feelings of frustration, anxiety, and straight-up rage that build up from hacking my way through the Concrete Jungle. Otherwise, I'd be crushed – just another

anonymous worker ant in a suit, quietly holding on for dear life, with no way out… except for jumping in front of the train.

So, is the revelation at the K/a/t/o Massacre Anniversary Show how I made peace with Tokyo? Sure—that, and not taking Japan Railways trains on this trip unless absolutely necessary. Seriously, it's *allll* about the Tokyo Metro. Chic, on-time, quiet, no infuriatingly "happy happy" train station jingles – and no "passenger injuries."

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Behind the Music: (Underground) Music as Social Soundtrack

In *Japanoise*, David Novak examines Noise music (with a capital "N") as the definitive case study in (Japanese) underground music, which he defines as "the 'ultimate' inside space of musical sociality. It represents a zone of deep creativity that seems only to be known by insiders, who collectively inhabit this subterranean world."[303] As music whose sound is decidedly anti- (or perhaps post-) melodic, it is difficult to identify or even define. What makes Noise… music? Novak identifies Noise as an "antigenre" that exists in relation to mainstream styles:

> [Noise's] immersion in popular music has been fundamental to its creative identity. Noise became a genre through its antagonistic feedback with Music, which split its generic difference into two interrelated loops. The first loop inscribed Noise in total separation from Music and all of its distinctive categories. In the second, Noise was integrated into circulation in the form of recordings and eventually distinguished as a musical genre of its own.[304]

[303] Novak, *Japanoise*, 66.
[304] Ibid, 118.

Noise's material existence on the fringes of society – obscure recordings in tucked-away record shops that are distorted beyond recognition in basement clubs, or personalized electronic gear manipulated to maximum capacity – is, according to Novak, what makes it underground. He writes, "Its aesthetic history is continually submerged in layered cycles of mediation, always reemerging changed, somewhere else," summed up in his theoretical concept of feedback: "circulation at the edge."[305] Indeed, Noise is an appropriation of media, of sensory overload, that "stress[es] the destructive power of machines over people."[306]

Commenting on experimental and avant-garde music in the 1960's New York, Benjamin Piekut similarly argues that a music's material manifestations are perhaps the most important way that music gains social meaning. He writes,

> Printed and recorded texts can travel much farther and last much longer as part of a social grouping. This is why it is crucial to understand a network as heterogeneous, as something far more complex than a simple *social* network of composers and critics who get each other gigs… Shared musical concerns – a predilection for tone clusters or a certain sonic eclecticism – play a role in the act of grouping, ,but this dimension Is not deterministic and is in fact conditioned by the vast apparatus of connections surrounding and supporting it.[307]

Yet while Novak sets out to critique genre in his understanding of Noise – and while Piekut echoes claims that materiality creates the most permanent socio-musical networks -- it remains to be answered why, of all of the records tucked away in Japan's (and surely New York's) plethora of quirky record shops, musicians gravitate(d) toward experimenting with harsher, post-industrial sounds. What, exactly, is a party – and how are underground musicians

[305] Ibid, 19
[306] Ibid, 179
[307] Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 18.

and their fans relating to this music? Is there even such a thing as an inherently "underground" sound?

In this chapter, I consider underground music from a social perspective based on nearly two years of experience going to underground parties, practice and jam sessions, and tours, as well as performing with these musicians on piano or as a DJ myself, throughout Japan (and in the United States). My social understanding of the underground is similar to that of Kai Fikenstcher, whose time in New York's underground in the 1980s and 1990s leads him to conclude that "the prefix 'underground'… points to the sociopolitical function of fhte music, framing it as one type of music that in order to have meaning and continuity is kept away, to a large degree, from mainstream society, mass media, and those empowered to enforce prevalent moral and aesthetic codes and values."[308] With the underground music scenes in Tokyo and Osaka as my primary case studies, I argue that the ever-changing aesthetic of underground music is determined by a set of unchanging social principles and ideals, centered on notions of resistance, that are expressed differently depending on location. First, I locate the underground within a broader societal context; next, I explore the principles of resistance in the underground and how communities are formed around them; lastly, I discuss how the underground negotiates with the forces of capitalism that it seeks to resist. By considering underground music from an ethnographic perspective, I ultimately aim to show how understanding aesthetics as social, rather than sonic (or visual), phenomena challenge the

[308] Kai Fikentscher, *'You Better Work!' Underground Dance Music in New York City* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 5.

efficacy of considering genre in scholarship, and bridge gaps between theory and experience in ethnomusicological writing.

As a final disclaimer, this chapter – as in the others -- is written in a performative style that seeks to stay true to the experience had in the field. More so than in the other chapters, however, the writing that follows is experimental—perhaps more literary than scholarly in its scope. Through this style of writing, I hope to enact what Harris Berger has identified as "stance": a concept in ethnographic writing that embraces "the affective, stylistic, or valual quality with which a person engages with an element of her experience."[309] Because my experience in underground Japan left an indelible mark on my perception of the world, the process of writing this chapter naturally conflated the "personal" with the "professional," which I ultimately decided to embrace as the kind of phenomenological experiment that this notion of "stance" deems inevitable. After all, notes Berger, "a necessary dimension of our engagement with things, the structure of experience that I am calling stance is a powerful phenomenon that is at play in all forms of expressive culture."[310] Besides, as the narratives presented here show, what resulted in a hopeless entanglement with the Japanese underground was less a product of my doing than it was an inevitable unfolding of events that I could never have planned so perfectly myself.

In writing in this style, I also hope to enact a metacommentary on the underground values that I, frankly, found changed my life. These include transparency (staying as true as

[309] Harrris M. Berger, *Stance: Ideas about Emotion, Style, and Meaning for the Study of Expressive Culture (*Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press)m, xiv.
[310] Ibid

possible to my experience), egalitarianism (using accessible language), interpretation and individuality (taking a risk by being true to my experience), clarity of intent (bringing feelings and inklings into material reality), and performance (offering my perspective, without claiming it as the *only* perspective).

And now, let's hit it!

Locating the Underground: Space and Intent

It was only after I had been awarded a Fulbright-mtvU fellowship that I considered adding underground music into my research; in fact, even pop music was a rather recent development in the way I was thinking about Japanese music at that time – a move inspired by the fellowship's application requirements, to be frank. This isn't to say that I wasn't interested in Japanese pop music and society before, but rather that, like any "good ethnomusicologist," I had only been considering the "traditional" music, dance, and general feel of the *obon* festivals to answer what remains the central questions of my research: why is it that music is able to bring people together into communities – and what is the relationship of these communities with contemporary (Japanese) society at large?

Since I had begun thinking about this question in conjunction with space-time relationships – the music of the past and the music of the present – it suddenly occurred to me that underground music might provide a nice theoretical balance as music of the *future*. I wasn't exactly sure what that meant at the time, but it seemed like solid enough reasoning to move forward with the hypothesis. To be honest, I didn't even know what "underground" meant at that time either—I pitched my revised idea to mtvU as "minimal techno," which they ate right up to seem hip to the young people – but I knew that I'd recognize whatever this

music was when I heard it. The entire premise was born from experiences I had several years prior, back when I was teaching English on the island in the Seto Inland sea where I lived for two years. Osaka wasn't too far once you're on the mainland from Awaji Island, so every so often I'd go there to have rambunctious weekends that I simply couldn't have on-island, not only because there wasn't any nightlife whatsoever, but because I didn't want to be seen by my students or anyone else the community. [311] I was teaching kids, you know?

Not that I did anything particularly wild in Osaka, either. Yup, getting lost on the trains and trying to find the Midousuji Subway Line in Umeda Station– another *craaaazy* night! If I was with a friend, I'd *maybe* drink some cheap plum wine in Triangle Park and stay in the nearby capsule hotel (one of just a few in town that allow women to stay!) in America Town. Much like Lindo Jong's character in *The Joy Luck Club*, who was introduced to San Francisco's Chinatown by an acquaintance and told that it was where she would learn all she needed to know about life in the Big (foreign) City, I was introduced to America Town by an acquaintance who has studied abroad in Osaka and felt like I was let in on a great secret. As of 2018 you'll be hard-pressed to see me hanging around there (it's so grungy and sleazy, and honestly, kind of embarrassing as a person brought up in America), but at the time it was all I knew.

My little excursions off-island began to evolve when another acquaintance, this time from my undergraduate days at the University of Chicago, moved to Osaka, and offered to show me around to places (slightly) outside of the America Town/Shinsaibashi/Namba area in

[311] Seriously, I was something of a local celebrity. "Jiru, I heard you bought bananas at a supermarket far away from the one near your house. What were you doing all the way up there? And do *all* Americans eat so many bananas?"

the city's center. He was an eccentric fellow – the kind of guy who unironically wears a skirt because "it's just more comfortable." He also once told me, so serious as to toe the line with the rage of injustice, that humans should have "at least" six arms. Given his unconventional outlook on pretty much any topic, it makes sense that he was into underground shows. I'm not sure how he found out about these clubs – online streaming sites like Soundcloud, maybe – but all that matters is that when he took me with him to my first show, I felt like I was home. As a young foreign woman living on in the country with a bunch of older people – the statistic for the tiny island of Nushima was easy to remember: 70% of the population over age 70 – I felt the acute pressures of being an "outsider"… in many senses. My coworkers at the school didn't exactly make me feel welcome, either ("Don't call her Jiru Sensei, she's not *really* your teacher."). But in the tiny basement at Club Lunar (rest in peace) – and, later, Compufunk records back when it was still in Kita-horie and that one place that was just some couple's apartment that they turned into a lounge at night (where *was* it… Unagidani, maybe?) – amongst the softly persistent pulse of minimal techno music and nodding in solidarity at the other outcasts, similarly there by themselves, I felt like I could *relax*: like it was OK to just be myself.

And to dance however I wanted!

So when it came time to do fieldwork on so-called "underground" music, I followed my intuition: a rather underground approach, in retrospect. I knew that the music had probably changed since the Club Lunar days, but I also knew that would probably be electronic and techno-ish. I also knew the music would be found in spaces that are small, hole-in-the-wall clubs that you needed an *in* to find. This time around I'd be in Tokyo, a city with a metropolitan

population of 38 million, but I trusted that I'd eventually find a scene. But since I didn't have an *in* in Tokyo when I moved there in 2014, I hopped on to Resident Advisor – an online magazine and database for electronic music shows and releases – and searched for minimal techno shows. I soon found a "minimal techno show" at a place in Shibuya called Club Module (rest in peace) with no big-name DJs in the lineup.

Perfect!

The music was fine – a bit amateur, sometimes pedestrian (like techno Eurobeat) -- but the place itself was exactly what I was looking for: tiny, dirty, and unable to accommodate a big audience (and thus big-name artists). After that first show, I decided to hang out at Module for a while to see what passes through, hoping for the sound of *right now* that I would recognize only when I heard it. And that wish was fulfilled with the group DE$TINYBRINK, who were just finishing up a set when I walked in the very next weekend. It was two guys with a lot of wires on a fold-up table: one playing a 707 beat machine, the other on a hybrid analog-digital Korg synthesizer. The guy on 707s was bobbing his head back and forth like a super cool turtle who didn't give a *shit*, while the second guy looked pretty out there, like he was living the *lifestyle*: emaciated, a partially-shaved head that he obviously did himself, and probably high. He looked like a mad scientist plugging and un-plugging color-coded cords that produced different sounds of post-industrial, intergalactic grit, and at the end he got so into it that he punched the wall behind him in rhythm with the 707s.

Whoa whoa whoa, who was THAT?!

It turns out that Module was hosting a show with musicians who normally perform at another club, the cozy and chic Bar Ringtail, in nearby Harajuku; this was when I learned that scenes tend to form around place, or perhaps space. The owner of Ringtail, for instance, supports new talent, like DE$TINYBRINK, while also supporting more established figures, like Hair Stylistics (formerly known as the noise legend Violent Onsen Geisha [*bouryoku onsen geisha*], formally known as Nakahara Masaya).[312] This means that he organizes shows to highlight talent, and allows artists to practice in the space or organize shows themselves. The Ringtail crowd seemed like a tight unit, descending upon the normally empty-ish Module en-masse. And they all seemed so different from the typical Tokyo-ite, with button-downed cardigans and designer handbags. These people we were *cool*— into dope music, vintage clothing, purposefully mismatched earrings, crazy fur hats, pins and stickers, neo-spiritual jargon, clove cigarettes, sunglasses at night *inside*, conversations about being different, about capitalism…

Even though I had stumbled across exactly what didn't even know I was looking for – a band that seemed totally now, and a group of people critical of capitalism – I still made efforts to go to other shows and check out different vantage points of non-mainstream Tokyo. One of the flyers I'd picked up at Module was for another "minimal techno" show at the decidedly mainstream Club Air, famously featured in the film *Lost in Translation*, and decided to check it out, just to see which way the wind blows around this place. After being swept up in a group of European travelers on their way to pre-show cocktails (hey, why not, and they treated), at Club

[312] In addition to being a legend in underground Japan, helping to spearhead the Noise scene back in the early 1990s, Mr. Nakahara is also a best-selling novelist – and a friendly, helpful person who continues to dedicate himself to smaller performances with his ever-changing sound.

Air was where I caught a first glimpse of the White DJ Phenomenon: mediocre but famous white dudes from the US or Europe who headline the show and play on the main floor, while local, less famous Japanese DJs play in the smaller "salons" (sometimes spelled as "saloons").[313] Turned off by the expensive 2500 yen entrance fee and the German DJ playing downstairs in the main floor that everyone was fawning over (thereby uncomfortably recreating colonialist power dynamics), I hung out in the salon, leaning against the wall, sipping a drink while contemplating when I should take the train back home to the ever-*shibui* (rustic, worn-in, yet charming – like George Clooney) neighborhood of Oimachi.

But then I heard the sound of breaking glass… and mixed-metered break beats…

DJ Edamame: a musician born and raised in Tokyo who had recently returned from Germany, where he played with local DJs and released an EP. His sound was urban and dark, yet playful—it creatively samples abrasive sounds tempered with a steady, danceable groove that make them sound effortlessly, if oddly beautiful. After dancing until the end of his set, wishing it had lasted longer, I introduced myself. He was friendly and accommodating, and we chatted for a bit before he invited me to a small party happening that weekend at a basement recording studio in Shinjuku. In what turned out to be my first all-night show (hanging out until the trains start running again at around 4:40am), I miraculously found the tiny space and was pleasantly surprised. His show this time was different; instead of DJing, he performed live on an analog/digital synthesizer with an electric keyboard attached. There were maybe four people in

[313] Many of the more famous clubs in Tokyo, like Air, Club Asia, Soundvision, Liquid Room, Unit, and surely others have this set-up: a big dance floor for the main DJs, and smaller rooms for supporting acts.

the audience, and the set was dope: raw, loud, but melodic and danceable—*sasuga* ("that's just like," "that's so") Edamame.

We chatted after his set outside the soundproof doors, and he shared a bit about his background. Half Japanese and half European, he mentioned that he felt like an outcast growing up, which is probably why he ended up running in this scene; it found him more than him finding it.[314] For DJ Edamame, life in Europe was a source of inspiration, since he found the lifestyle so much more relaxed with a balance between work and leisure time more favorable than that in Japan.

A little way into our conversation, he began asking *me* questions: how long have I lived in Japan, do I play music or DJ, who else have I been following so far in the underground for my research? Freshly excited from my encounters with DE$TINYBRINK –whose shows I had starting catching, and with whom I was connected on social media – I asked if he'd ever heard of them. In what remains one of the most beautifully fantastic coincidences I've ever experienced, his face lit up, and he said: "They're practically my best friends. We play together all the time."

So there we were, sitting in a basement in Tokyo with ringing ears, having found the same tiny scene through two completely different entry points… in a city of 38 million people.

#en

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[314] Interestingly, DJ Edamame is not the only "ha-fu" (slang for half-Japanese) in the scene. The other member of DE$TINYBRINK is half Japanese-half African American, and confided that he has similarly felt like an outsider growing up in Japan.

So, where is the underground? In *Hip-Hop Japan*, Ian Condry says that it's the cutting edge of the market. He writes,

> I argue that we can come to a deeper understanding of the relationship between commercial and underground media worlds by viewing the development of the scene as a kind of pyramid, with top artists reaching greater heights at the same time a wider base of would-be artists emerged away from the public spotlight. In this sense, the power of media industries is clearly limited, and commercialization capture only part of the scene's dynamics. Thus, I argue that the analytical divide between the power of culture industries on one hand, and the organic creativity of underground artists… on the other, should not be viewed as oppositional, but rather in terms of their networked interaction.[315]

Later, he continues: "Amateur recording artists, and even the most independent artists, collectively constitute only a small fraction of overall [music] sales. Nevertheless, thy form the base out of which large companies select the kinds of artists they see as having strong sales potential."[316]

Condry is right to point out that much of what has become part of the popular music soundscape originally had its roots in the underground. Indeed, hip-hop – once a rebellious counterculture -- has become so mainstream that anyone can walk into a clothing shop in the youth-centered Shibuya neighborhood of Tokyo, buy a New York Yankees cap with a flat brim, some Air Jordans and an oversized sweatshirt, and play into the fantasy. But this is precisely the problem: can hip-hop *still* be discursively understood as underground if everyone has access to a commodified version of it? While Condry does consider the tensions that arise when underground artists have the chance to go mainstream, he concludes that "the dynamics of media businesses… merge from conventions decided by debates that usually operate in a

[315] Ian Condry, *Hip-Hop Japan: Rap and Paths of Globalization*, 19.
[316] Ibid, 184-5.

context of uncertainty about success, and even differing understandings of what success might mean."[317] In other words, his perspective considers underground music from the point of view of a record company executive, rather than the artists themselves, leaving an important question unanswered: *why* would underground artists want to resist mainstream success in the first place? Moreover, Condry's reasoning inadvertently casts underground in a rather cynical light, shattering the illusion that underground musicians are rebels who live by their own rules. Instead, it's just everyone tryin' to get big.

That's certainly true of some musicians, perhaps especially so in the hip-hop world explored by Condry, whose very aesthetic is built around a ruthless American aspirationalism (influential hip-hop artist 50 Cent's debut record, for instance, is entitled *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*). Beyond discussions of media circulation and globalized consumption patterns, I also saw underground artists make it big during my time in Tokyo, which confirms the idea that the underground is an incubation space for the Next Big Thing. Soon after I started following them, DE$TINYBRINK started getting super hot. Back when they were still playing their big shows at Ringtail and what will forever remain my secret spot in Tokyo (shh!), their charisma was off the charts. With a square, pulsating, raw beat of the drum machine rooted the post-apocalyptic, explosive, post-industrial blast-off of the synthesizer, DE$TINYBRINK were so *it*, so Tokyo, so now – and they knew it, which is part of what made the fall and winter of 2014 such an exciting time. When DE$TINYBRINK played a show, you knew it was going to be a good time. The room felt electric whenever the Mad Scientist walked in, and it was exciting to be a part of it. He was

[317] Ibid, 186.

also quite a character, and everyone knew he could be difficult, but they let it slide so that he could continue doing his thing— as a crowd, we were just happy to have DE$TINYBRINK, but excited (and perhaps a little anxious) to see them maybe hit the big time. Because hey, they were just so dope that they *deserved* it.

Support, energy, excitement, dope music… those were the days.

By the spring of 2015, DE$TINYBRINK were starting to do some tours in Osaka and Kyoto, and since I happened to be in town at the same time catching some other shows, I decided to check them out in a new setting. They played at two clubs that I later realized were not equivalently underground spaces to where they gigged in Tokyo, but were slightly more mainstream—that host bigger artists. And that's when it occurred to me that DE$TINYBRINK *was* one of the bigger artists, not least because they were from Tokyo— which has its finger on a more globally cosmopolitan pulse of now-ness than Osaka.

It was also around this time that I started to notice that DE$TINYBRINK, as dope as they were, only really had one style: an hour + long performance that started slow, maybe with some melodies etched out by the synthesizer, while a foundational beat was gradually mixed in until eventually the whole thing exploded into a relentless, noise-y interstellar time-warp that finally tapered off into a coda of post-coital melodic utterances. But their gig in Osaka's Compufunk Records in April of 2015, they did their usual thing followed by slower set seemingly influenced by a somewhat forced interpretation of the sensitive intimacy of modal jazz.[318]

[318] Although modal jazz never factored into their sound, the group's inspirations, among many grunge/industrial groups from LA and Europe (namely Robe Door, Empty Set), included Sun Ra and his Arkestra… which came through in concept, but not in feeling, during this particular performance.

Needless to say, the energy in the room stalled – what they played wasn't bad, but it just didn't make sense following the explosive momentum of their first set. And from my perspective after having seen almost every show over the course of seven months, it just didn't suit them at all.

Uh, wtf is this?

And that's when I realized: *oh, they're preparing for the big time*. They had to try to expand their repertoire. But maybe it was all planned—the Mad Scientist (who made all the group's decisions—he was something of a notorious hot-head[319]) had actually been in several bands before, either on synthesizer or, way back when, on bass guitar, with which he once performed at South by Southwest in Austin, Texas. As self-described "drifter," he grew up with well-to-do parents in Tokyo and at Tsukuba in nearby Ibaraki prefecture, where his father worked at the local university. He said that all of the other kids were "sons and daughters of, like, astronauts" and that he struggled with feeling guilty about having such successful and supportive parents but being interested in underground music. But a rebellious streak took him away from Japan for a while to gig through Europe and later Los Angeles, where he felt musically and personally accepted. After returning to Japan in the summer of 2014, equipped with these cosmopolitan musical experiences, he put together DE$TINYBRINK with Mr. Drum Machine, with whom he'd previously played in some bands, and took off.

Maybe it was always part of the plan to make it big. Which is fine, but by June of 2015, at what would be their last big show as a headliner at Tokyo's Liquidroom, it felt *setsunai* (bittersweet, a longing sort of nostalgia) to see them live. On the one hand, it was exciting to

[319] A mutual friend (and former bandmate) once confided: "As a bandmate and a person, he's kind of… difficult. But as a musician he just has that certain *je ne sais qua*, so… we deal with it, you know?"

see DE$TINYBRINK connect with so many people, and to see a large audience of (several hundred!) people working nine-to-fives (which, in Japan, is never nine-to-five) get in touch with the down-and-dirty, raw and unfiltered vision of Tokyo that *was* DE$TINYBRINK. But on the other hand, it felt sort of like being ditched: that the people who supported them along the way became secondary to the "masses" of which we were now a part, the people who didn't even know them, who never got lost trying to find the venues where they performed back in the day (I got hopelessly lost twice trying to find Dommune), who stayed up countless nights seeing them at those tiny parties, reeking of cigarette smoke and commuting over an hour to get home at the unforgiving hours near sunrise, who made the *effort* to hear them. Maybe it wasn't about connecting with us so much as playing for us until a bigger (better?) opportunity came along. That's what made it sting.

And it wasn't just me: etched in my memory is the image of DJ Edamame, who had since become a supporting act (and, in a stroke of genius reflective of this organic rearrangement of the scene, temporarily changed his DJ name to DJ Ghost Sweeper in the springtime), looking on at DE$TINYBRINK from backstage. His stance, leaning against a pole utterly motionless yet entirely focused, with his chin resting on a clenched fist as he gazed in DE$TINYBRINK's direction but seemingly beyond them, belied what felt like a mix of regret, bitterness, resentment, and defeat. Because for as much as a disagreeable asshole as the Mad Scientist could be, DE$TINYBRINK really did just have a certain *something* about them that couldn't be

defined, much less contained. And maybe that's why they were headlining at Liquidroom, and why Edamame was working backstage as a side gig.[320]

In the end, DE$TINYBRINK broke up both suddenly and catastrophically in September of 2015. Shocking though this was, in retrospect it makes sense: the Universe simply had different plans. And you know, it felt right, like karmic justice, or a dark cloud lifting—something felt restored. Now, the scene was no longer dictated by the Mad Scientist and his eccentric, unpredictable antics; it was given back to those who had always been there behind the scenes, like DJ Edamame, or those who deserved more spotlight, like 8e (pronounced "hachi-eh"), the psychedelic flower child with sprinkles of reckless renegade, and the yin/yang sensibilities of Sanka, who somehow sounds both darkly industrial yet light-footed, rock solid yet quicksilver, cohesive yet ever-changing.

So, returning to Condry's location of the underground as that which is just beneath the surface of mainstream popularity, I argue that this is both true and false. The issue is that his perspective is sympathetic toward mainstream success, and glosses over the idealistic principles that I believe define the underground for what it is. DE$TINYBRINK were the kingpins of underground Tokyo at one point, but their demise revealed that their asymptotic journey toward mainstream success left the scene feeling hollowed-out—as though the Mad Scientist had used the community of the underground as rocket fuel to eventually leave.[321]

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[320] DJ Edamame actually works several jobs, often bartending at clubs where he performs and organizes shows. As talented as he is – and he is a very creative DJ with a chic, mature sound – he's equally committed to supporting young talent in whatever ways he can. To me, this is not a mark of failure, but of great success.

[321] Following the group's demise, Mr. Drum Machine – still dedicated to the scene – started performing solo, and later put together a new group, CIRCUSCOYOTE, with friends and acquaintances from other groups that had recently disbanded. Also worth noting is the Mad Scientist's connection with another performer who had also got her start bartending at Bar Ringtail, and who is now a major celebrity in Japan.

Heartbreaking that it was that the group broke up (and in the way that they did, which for privacy's sake won't be revealed here), DE$TINYBRINK'S falling out ultimately revealed that there really was a community there to begin with: one based around a value system that was, in the end, was betrayed by DE$TINYBRINK's success.

All the same, Condry frames his understanding of what was, at the time, Japan's emergent hip-hop scene in relation to mainstream society, perhaps because such a trajectory was seen as inevitable. Hip-hop has been mainstream in the United States since the late 1980s, in large part due to Aerosmith's collaboration with Run DMC on 1986's *Walk This Way*. But his explicit understanding of the underground as the bottom of "kind of pyramid, with top artists reaching greater heights at the same time a wider base of would-be artists emerged away from the public spotlight… Thus, I argue that the analytical divide between the power of culture industries on one hand, and the organic creativity of underground artists on the other, should not be viewed as oppositional, but rather in terms of their networked interaction."[322] As discussed in the previous section, casting the underground as a site of potential "would-be" artists disregards the social principles that keep many underground artists in the underground despite chances at success. A Kansai (the Western Japanese region home to Kyoto, Kobe, and Osaka)-based DJ and producer known as DIGITALBOY, for instance, has worked with Aphex Twin and rejected numerous offers from European record labels to release his music because he was wanted to remain dedicated to principles of anti-capitalism and resistance of

[322] Ibid, 19.

mainstream popular culture.[323] What's more, some underground Japanese hip hop artists happily perform in underground venues and are less interested in achieving mainstream success than collaborate with their friends (which, to many, is what hip-hop was all about before it became mainstream). The Osaka-based hip-hop duo Bean Boyz recorded and released an album in 2017[324], produced by Chico N (another alias for DIGITALBOY), with only one goal: give it their best shot to create some fun music with and for friends. They are not would-be artists; they *are* artists, performing for their chosen audience of those in the know.

So if there are some artists in the underground that are trying to make it big, and others still resisting the notion to the point of self-sabotage, where, exactly *is* the underground? I argue that it is exists wherever there is a community of people – musicians, artists, and anyone interested – who are skeptical of whatever's mainstream, on radical principle. It's organic, bound together by individuals who are all haunted by a vague sense of being different – like that crowd at Module -- and of wanting something different, no matter what it looks or sounds like. David Novak is right that this puts underground music at the fringes of society, but this is not always a conscious decision—and it's certainly not something that can be found by digging through boxes at hole-in-the-wall record shops alone. Indeed, DE$TINYBRINK's journey from underground royalty to fallen stars shows that underground is constantly changing, evasive, and can't really be pinned down as a sound—as a genre.

[323] After struggling financially for much of his adult life, however, he eventually decided to sign with French label MENACE in 2017—with the support of Osaka and Tokyo's underground scenes, who encouraged him to share his music with a broader audience. In the end, though, the album was never released.
[324] *Zenbu A-men* ("All [the] A-Side")

And from the experience I had being fantastically introduced to the same small scene through two completely different entry points, I believe that the underground is not something you can find: it's either already in you as a set of principles—as a feeling -- or it isn't. And this is an important truism to make note of as an ethnographer of this music. On the other hand, it's not an exclusive club, and you can join it at any time. All you have to do is change the way you look at the world: start doubting what everybody else is doing, stop thinking so much[325] -- and be as true to yourself as humanly possible, even and especially if some of your fellow party-goers are just posturing.

Zenkoku[326] Networks: Shared Principles and Problematizing the "Underground Sound"

After realizing that the larger forces of *en* seemed to have brought us together at that basement recording studio show in Shinjuku, Edamame suddenly me in on a "secret mountain party" happening a few weeks later in the woods not far from Mount Fuji. He wouldn't be going, but DE$TINYBRINK was, and after asking if I was cool with drugs ("um… yeah, sure, whatever"), he suggested that I get in touch with the Mad Scientist so that we could go together. I was both excited and nervous; from what I'd sensed and heard, this Mad Scientist character was living life on the edge – playing around on a synthesizer in a tiny apartment for 18 hours a day in Tokyo's western outskirts with no job other than writing album reviews for an online music magazine when he needed the cash. And I'd only sort of talked to him once in person, when he was making his way through a crowd of people at a headphone concert[327] that

[325] Do you know *how* many times I've been told this since running with these crowds?
[326] "Throughout Japan"
[327] A headphone concert is where everyone in the audience receives a pair of high-quality over-the-ear headphones that the musicians' sets are then broadcast through. It's surreal—everyone moving and dancing together, without a sound being heard otherwise.

they played in an art gallery, where he shouted, "HEY, you're the researcher, get in touch sometime!"

Initially skeptical, my gut nonetheless told me that I should pursue this -- it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and my underground research was lining up more perfectly than I could have ever planned myself—not only had I found a scene, the scene itself seemed interested in adopting *me*. A few days later, the Mad Scientists actually beat me to the punches by finding me on Facebook and sent a message. Apparently, Edamame had already suggested to him that they take me along to this "secret mountain party," and the Mad Scientist said I should "sneak in their van."[328] Again, I was both excited and nervous. Do I go away for a weekend to a "secret mountain party" with a couple of dudes I hardly know who seem pretty intense, or do I make the "sensible" choice and stay in Tokyo?

My father, in fact, was the one who inspired me to make what is, in retrospect, the obviously correct choice. "Hey, go with the band, be safe, and have a good time. Did I ever tell you about the first and only time I tripped on acid? One of the brothers at my fraternity slipped it to me and I had no idea what was happening, and I was so freaked out that I wandered around Orono (Maine) at thirty below zero with my jacket open, crying… but boy, I played one hell of a game of darts that night."[329]

So on November 1st, 2014, after pulling an all-nighter celebrating Halloween in the cluster that was Shibuya that night (thousands of people crammed in the street that devolved

[328] This was all in English—since he's spent so much time abroad, the Mad Scientist spoke quite fluently, peppered with interesting slang that seemed at once jarringly out of place, but also entirely fitting of his overall punk-y vibe.
[329] I didn't, in fact, trip acid at the rave, but my father apparently felt that this anecdote would ease my apprehensions.

into a *nampa riotto*[330]), I wearily hopped on a series of trains to meet Mr. Drum Machine while the Mad Scientist took care of getting the gear into the van. Mr. Drum Machine and I grabbed a quick coffee at Starbucks – it looked like he had been up all night as well – where he gave me the lowdown on where we were headed. "We're, uh," he said shyly, "basically going to an illegal rave." When the Mad Scientist finally showed up – unapologetically late, of course – he was wearing sunglasses despite the rainy weather and a scarf tied around his head, looking very much the part of the eccentric artist Edamame had said he was. And then we hopped in the van and drove eight hours to Yamanashi prefecture, when the Mad Scientist immediately whipped out a pipe and started smoking weed with one hand and steering with the other.

Here we go…

As we approached to our destination, I felt as though I had entered some new dimension where things were moving at warp-speed. I had only known DE$TINYBRINK for a little over a month, and here we were, spending a weekend together at a *rave* in what was turning out to be an extremely remote campground in the mountains. The road kept winding up and up, passing through one-way bridges and tunnels. The guys kept shouting, *yabai, yabai!*[331] while I quietly savored the drop in temperature detectable even from inside the car, grateful for acting on my instinct to pack warm clothes. When we finally arrived, I paid the surprisingly cheap 2000 yen entry fee, got a free pin and some stickers, and checked out my digs for the night.

[330] *Nampa riotto:* a semi-riot that forms when men grope women en-masse on streets flooded with people, as in Halloween or festivals. *Nampa* basically translates as (a man) "hitting on" (a woman); interesting to note is that this situation is not referred as a *chikan* (groping) riot.
[331] "This is so crazy!"

415—a semi-annual party held in the woods, organized by a small group of friends in Tokyo and Kansai, the western region of Japan notably home to Kyoto and Osaka. It turns out DE$TINYBRINK was invited by a friend of the friends – Sanka -- and since they didn't really know anyone there, they set up camp and started barbequing squid legs, vegetables, sausages, and other classic Japanese barbeque foods by themselves while I ventured off to actually listen to the music, by myself. I was instantly struck by the vibe of the party: in no way was it like my image of a typical rave, where everyone dances together in Huxeleyan-like uniformity (complete with soma!... or MDMA, anyway) to cheesy EDM with that pornographically orgasmic beat-drop. Instead, it was a small-ish group of what seemed to be hippies, some of whom even had babies, dancing, chatting, eating outside and getting warm near the bon-fire. The music was also totally unlike anything I had heard in Tokyo, but was equally dope. A group called Teahouses, based in Tokyo but in another scene than the one I with which I was running, was playing a set that literally made me stop in my tracks. Three dudes on synthesizers, and one guy – Kasei – on a microphone, uttering in a bratty voice that cut straight through my entire soul: "I had a dream. I had a dream, but it died. I had… I had a dream… I had a dream, but it died." Then nonsense syllables.

I felt like I was on the edge of the Earth.

Next came Friendly Giant—another Tokyo-based DJ who sometimes ran with the same crowd as Coffeeshops, but more so with a DJ named Labyrinth who, in addition to spinning pulsatingly dark yet danceable music, organizes big parties to support his friends from all over Japan (and abroad). Friendly Giant's style is immaculate, with a selection of fresh songs with a round, soft electronic sound that are all somehow perfectly in persistent, seamless rhythm with

one another. Again, I was floored—this was beyond anything I had expected. And the sound system! The group of friends who organize 415 bring all their own gear to make a wall of speakers with a sound that's at once loud, yet soft—like being surrounded by a womb of electronic sound without any sharp edges.

In fact, it was music and sound I had been searching for my entire life, without even realizing it. The truth is, I've always been interested in dance music, but growing up on the dead end of a dirt road in a rural border town in northern Vermont, there couldn't have been any kind of music more out of place. Nonetheless loving anything with a fun, free, and danceable beat, I secretly listened to the copy of the copy of the Venga Boys cd burned by my mom's boyfriend's brother's daughter on a portable CD player in my room, and secretly savored whenever the DJ played the YMCA between Kenny Chesney and Brooks and Dunn at my middle school dances.

Oh no… She Thinks My Tractor's Sexy *again?*

In classic Friendly Giant fashion, every song was as playfully driving as the one before it, and I was praising my lucky stars. This wasn't a fluke; it truly was *exactly* what I was looking for. In a way, it felt as though my entire life had lead me to this moment, which was at the intersection of both personal and professional interests. It was around this time that one of the guys who had joined the DE$TINYBRINK barbeque came to find me to make sure I was "OK" (*um, yeah man, just listening to the music we drove eight hours to hear*), and also when I realized that maybe this Mad Scientist character was a little "too cool for school." Why wasn't

he here listening to this dope music, playing from a twenty-foot wall of speakers assembled by friends?

They eventually did come out to see what was going on, but since they weren't going on until five or six o'clock the next morning, there was no scrambling anticipation to set up. While the Mad Scientist seemed entirely unphased, slumped over in a fold-up chair looking completely bored, I was growing increasingly curious about this eccentric-looking guy I had noticed all night, who was apparently a DJ as well—indeed, most of the people there were other performers, and those that weren't were friends who had come with them, like me. When I first saw him dressed in his bright red pants, a mint-green sweatshirt with tiny dinosaurs all over it, a brown fur hat, neon-colored sneakers that looked like space shoes, a giant gold chain, and oversized novelty glasses, a part of me recognized him: *I know exactly who you are*, I thought. *You're whimsical, you're out there, you're always smiling and cheerful, but you're actually shy, reserved, and maybe afraid to be your* real *self… you're like me*. So despite having slept in days, I waited until around 1am for him to start playing, at which point he stripped down to nothing but skin-tight, rainbow-colored sequin shorts in the cold mountain air while the speakers behind him bellowed his stage name:

"DIGITALBOY!"

Expecting to hear something darker than the beautifully manicured house music set he had put together, and finding the whole strip tease-thing to be a grandiose display of narcissism, and a bit over the top for where I was at that night energy-wise, DIGITALBOY's set

marked when I decided to go to sleep. In what would later be untrue, I told the Mad Scientist: "I respect his sound, but it's not anything I'm into."

I ended up sleeping in a van for a few hours before getting up to see Sanka, and then DE$TINYBRINK, who played last. They ended up blowing out the sound system not once but *twice*, ultimately showing that, in many ways, they didn't belong there. Everyone seemed confused by their set, keeping distance from the speakers and the nearly extinguished bon fire, and the guys packed up the van to head back to Tokyo pretty much as soon as they were done. But there was still time to introduce myself to one more person:

"Excuse me, are you DIGITALBOY?"

"Yes…"

"Hi, my name is Jillian. You can call me Jill. I research music in Japan, including underground music. I only heard a little bit of your set, but it seemed funny. *Yoroshiku onegai itashimasu*.[332] Bye!"

That brief conversation apparently left an impression on him, and the next month he invited me to a *bon enkai* end-of-the-year party for the 415 crowd that was taking place at a club called Roots in Tokyo. I had gone on a whim, checking the Twitter account I had made to follow musicians (since Facebook is only one of severalmeans through which [underground] musicians share news about shows and releases) for the first time in weeks. And, in another

[332] Literally, "please [humbly do me the favor of being a part of my life] from now on," but used in situations when you meet someone with whom you might forge a lasting connection; very loosely translatable as "nice to meet you."

moment of perfect synchronicity, there was DIGITALBOY's message, sent that very evening: *kite kite*! Come out!

While I was technically there for "research" as always, the night felt very different than the other parties I had been going to in Tokyo. The usual mood for parties where DE$TINYBRINK and Edamame played were usually dark, brooding, thoughtful, but serious. But here, people were smiling –they were dancing and *laughing*! The atmosphere was light and fun, and musicians and fans alike not only recognized me, but welcomed me; everyone was so openly accommodating. While the Mad Scientist would sometimes spend entire parties smoking blunts in a corner while looking at an iPad through his jacket hood at the basement hangout west of Shinjuku, openly ignoring everyone, Friendly Giant offered to send me the recorded archives of every 415 party throughout the years. I had a few drinks, and dancing to music that was simply much happier than everything else I'd heard in Tokyo, I felt in good spirits—at peace.

I mean, they were having a *bon enkai* in the first place!

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415, and the circles of musicians that the rave introduced to my understanding of Japan's underground music world, indicates that the underground functions as a system of overlapping networks. Both Novak and Condry reach similar conclusions in their own research, though through differing theoretical perspectives and with their own NUANCES. Novak's conception of underground musical networks is at once global and material, and understands the circulation of musical media (records, tapes, CDs, or digital formats) as part of larger networks of feedback—which, as previously quoted, he describes as "circulation at the edge…

[marking] the transition between something and nothing."[333] He argues that "narratives of global media often focus on the displacement of circulating forms from their original sites of creative production. But audiences bring music back to place through their own sonic explorations," and goes on to say: "But I am not arguing that Japanoise is a singular local entity or that it was generated only by foreign misappropriation. Its cultural character reflects an intricate historical relationship with the United States, through which Japan has been constructed as an antisubject of Western modernity."[334] In other words, the development of underground (noise) music in Japan came about from the flows of media that have been ultimately been determined by Japan's postwar geopolitical standing, described by my friends in the community as "*Amerika no dorei*"—America's slave. Novak's understanding of underground networks, then, is based on underground musician's negotiations with Japan's relationality to the West: as an inherently alien Other that gets reclaimed through aggressive music designed to assault its listeners.

But because he reaches these conclusions through studying underground musical artifacts alone, Novak's approach cannot account for the wide range of music that's actually performed in the underground, and how these styles interact with one another. Again, Novak's assertion that noise is underground because of the quality of its sound, derived from the feedback of media circulation between Japan and the West, disqualifies other non-noise music from being considered music "at the edge." While Novak (and Condry) paint a portrait of underground social spaces centered around a single style, I saw a lineups of noise, psychedelic

[333] Novak, *Japanoise*, 19.
[334] Ibid, 22.

DJing that sampled Mexican folk music and LA death drone, a live punk band, and the genre-transcending DE$TINYBRINK – noise-y to be sure, but which I once saw categorized on an online flyer (written by the Mad Scientist himself) as "death rave acid house."

Here, I argue that underground music is "underground" not merely due to its sound, but rather the social important gained through music's broader contexts in social gatherings. While none of the artists share the same sound, they do share the same social space through which their musical performances garner meaning. Tia DeNora argues something similar in *Music in Everyday Life*, where she writes:

> Within certain and more traditionally grounded segments of musicology, a concern with reception is often misconstrued as a disinclination to address music's 'intrinsic' properties, whether these concern structures, values or connotations. For example, it is often suggested that by turning the analytical lens on to music consumption one abandons the 'music itself'… On the contrary, a reflexive conception of music's force as something that is constituted in relation to its reception by no means ignores music's properties; rather, it considers how particular aspects of the music come to be significant in relation to particular recipients at particular moments.[335]

That the styles of DE$TINYBRINK were showcased alongside DJs like Edamame, 8e, and Sanka shows that the underground might be best conceived not as a sound, but as a style—a context, an attitude, perhaps as elusive as the problem of locating the underground.[336] Of course, most of these musicians rely on records, tapes, and other musical artifacts as sources of inspiration for their sound; the Mad Scientist ran an underground cassette label called Crooked Tapes, and 8e worked part-time in a record shop. But the material artifacts music itself cannot define the underground, not least because they are used differently by different people— the DJ's craft

[335] DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 23.

[336] I tested my hypothesis on aesthetic meaning and social contextualization through a (literally) experimental music series I put together in the spring of 2016. Please refer to the vignette "Peripheral Encounters" for details.

might rely heavily on records, but a group like DE$TINYBRINK (and other groups in Tokyo, such as CIRCUSCOYOTE) performs on electronic instruments: a fact that supports Novak's idea of the underground as being an "antigenre," but complicates his analytical framing of feedback.

What binds this scene together, then, if not its sound? I argue that a shared set of principles based on ideas of resistance defines the limits of the underground, and ultimately demonstrate the aesthetic of resistance that the scene embodies. At some point or another, most of the musicians in both the Tokyo crowd and the Kansai-based crowd at 415 explicitly expressed anti-capitalist, anti-government, and anti-nation sentiments. DJ Soybeans, for instance, often hung a self-made banner reading "Fuck the system!" (in English) on the DJ booth when he performed; DIGITALBOY used capitalism as an adjective in conversations, referring to mainstream music as "too capitalism."[337] Toward the morning hours of a party-turned-all-night-drinking-session with Edamame and the guitarist from FANG, a sense of trust between the three of us was established when I revealed that I've been critical of capitalism's effect on the human quality of life since reading Henry David Thoreau's *Walden, or Life in the Woods* at age 15; it was as though I had finally revealed myself an ally, rather than as a spy.[338]

[337] It is impossible to cite this, as this was a remark he often quipped (with judgemental undertones) off-the-cuff. A particular instance that comes to mind is when we encountered a street performer at Osaka Station in September of 2017 who was playing J-pop cover music on guitar. He became so enraged by this "too capitalist" performance (and my remark that "who cares, at least he's playing music") that he scolded me by saying that this guitarist was "a rapist and murderer" of music, and stormed off and got on his train without so much as a goodbye.

[338] Conversation, Tokyo, Japan, Februrary 2015. Worth noting is that Edamame, more than any of the other artist interlocutors that contributed to this dissertation, was sure to ask about my intention, and to request that all information be presented in an anonymous manner. Indeed, he isn't wrong to be suspicious, because I was, indeed, something of a spy throughout the course of this project—not with the underground, though, but rather with pop music. The fact that I got not one, but two interviews with government officials and received classified documents detailing Cool Japan still blows my mind.

Condry's conception of the *genba* (performance sites) more fully accounts for the role socializing has in shaping (underground) musical styles. The theoretical conclusions he draws in *Hip-Hop Japan* stem from his experience attending of a wide range of shows at *genba* throughout Tokyo: "[In] nightclubs, hip-hop musicians operate in a world where work and play merge in the combination of performing, socializing, and networking that makes up their clubland activities. In this we can see how popular culture is created through social activities that at times reproduce, at times subvert longstanding patterns of social relations undergirding daily life."[339] Condry's observations of the *genba* –the venue, the party, the musicians' home base, the gathering space – as the site where musicians' (and listeners) influence one another both in terms of sound and career opportunities is astute, and perhaps particularly salient underground Japan: a socio-culture where informal *kone* (connections) are a crucial element in defining social relations. As DE$TINYBRINK got hotter, for instance, the line-up for a show at their base *genba* was comprised back-to-back of allstars (Sanka, 8e, and the avant-garde, neo-jazz industrial group FANG), but often with an outlier that simply wasn't on the same level. Almost every time he started performing, people took a break from the floor to refill their drinks or chat amongst themselves. Why was he there? Because they had performed together in the past, and because this musician was a *sempai* (older, higher up in the social hierarchy).[340]

Concluding the discussion on underground networks, then, sees us revisit the ideas of genre and aesthetic. Both Condry and Novak focus on Japan's underground music through the lens of genre: hip-hop and noise, respectively. But problems arise because musicians are not

[339] Condry, *Hip-Hop Japan*, 16.
[340] Also evidence that, no matter how hard one runs from "mainstream values" (in the case of Japan, social hierarchies defined by age), there might always be blind spots.

bound by sound alone, and any analysis of these musical styles must include an understanding of not only their socialities, but also the principles that bind these social groups together lest they gloss over how and *why* the music sounds the way that it does. Yes, the underground exists in a Gestalt with that which is mainstream, but the music itself is constantly changing, coming in and out of fashion depending on what feels the most fresh. Noise still exists, but after seeing the legendary Merzbow perform live with FANG in 2014 wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with the words "I AM NOISE," I realized that it's now vintage-- and canonized. Yet it does still exist, along with hip-hop and other styles, only it's been transmogrified into something new: DE$TINYBRINK's harsh sound grounded with 707s, DIVEST's mix-metered industrial groove (a DJ I heard several times for the first time in December of 2017 and January of 2018, and by whom I was floored—he's *it*), FANG's blurred, slow-motion cadences stone-washed with amplified feedback, Sanka's raw and driving minimal pulse, CIRCUSCOYOTE's darkly carnivalesque, post-industrial free improve neo-drum circle.

In sum, the underground network forms a dizzying constellation: always changing, shifting, and morphing as musicians negotiate popularity, new artists emerge, and others fade into obscurity. What binds them together are these principles that, if not always faithfully enacted, at least function as a social code that, in turn, create opportunities for musicians across genres – and across the country – to come together at parties. In the following section, let's discuss how parties enact resistance, and the role that DJs – perhaps the most prominent form of performance in the underground scenes I explored – play.

On Parties and DJs (or, the Great Tokyo/Osaka Debate Revisited)

By the spring of 2015, I was in rough shape. Having developed insomnia from a flip-flopped sleeping schedule due to staying out all night at parties during the week(ends), as well as from feeling disconnected from reality in general, I decided to move to Osaka for my final three months in Japan. Although I mainly hung out with the DE$TINYBRINK crowd, I occasionally connected with Friendly Giant, who plays with a group of musicians based in Kansai (the Osaka/Kyoto/Kobe region) at 415 and 415-related parties. In February he invited me to something happening at a club/hair salon called C-wave in Kabuki-cho, Shinjuku's notoriously seedy red-light district, where he introduced me to Restricted Throw. A computer musician who creates what he thinks of as dance music sound collages, Resthrow (as he's known among friends) had gotten together with DIGITALBOY in early 2014 to form TIME MENACE: (what was) an anonymous music collective and online record label that had something around twenty members (although the exact number was neither clear nor important). As I sipped a drink and as he smoked a cigarette, he told me all about the group, which I found confusing. If that guy playing chip tune Game-Boy music downstairs is TIME MENACE, and Restricted Throw is also TIME MENACE, and DIGITALBOY is also TIME MENACE even if he's not at this party… then what *is* TIME MENACE?

As it turns out, the confusion-factor was part of the intent -- and true to the group's name, which plays with the idea that time is a (dangerous) illusion. While many members of TIME MENACE did solo gigs under actual monikers, their anonymity was purposefully implemented with two specific goals in mind. Feeling that underground music circles in Japan too much importance on the draw of big-name musicians that ultimately takes the scene away from people who just want to throw and go to parties, they sought to reemphasize actual

music-making while encouraging audiences to prioritize the same by surprising them with unpredictable lineups and combinations of musicians. Secondly, TIME MENACE opted for anonymity in order to create a highly egalitarian environment where musicians can feel free to share, express, experiment, and inspire one another with their musical styles, without the pressure of operating under the strict hierarchies that normally define Japanese social interactions – and of getting rich and famous, and selling out to capitalism. So, while DIGITALBOY often favors creating narrative arcs out of full songs from his iPad (or vinyl, if there are turn-tables available), Resthrow plays his sound collages. Meanwhile, TMB – a chip-tuner turned synthesizer fiend – plays a Tempest synthesizer, PACO plays beats from a drum machine. All the while, Stone Taro (not to be confused with the relatively famous Stones Throw) is curious about all of these styles—and in a single show, they might all have played together.

After meeting Resthrow, I was intrigued by the sound and idea of TIME MENACE, and the vibe in Osaka generally. It seemed so *different* from Tokyo… and as I became increasingly disenchanted with life in the Concrete Jungle, I felt pulled to make a trip down to compare my notes from the underground.[341] That's when I first properly saw TIME MENACE – which is to say, while I was aware of their existence -- at a show in a back room of an Indian restaurant in Osaka that also happens to host parties. I took a bus down, and despite stopping every two hours on the highway in the classic fashion of Japanese long-distance bus (heaven forbid, someone might want to eat *udon* noodles, or buy a souvenir, or smoke a cigarette), I was in

[341] Not to be confused with Fyodor Dostoevsky's.

high spirits by the time I arrived some ten hours later. Ditching my stuff at the capsule hotel in America Town – complete with a miniature Statue of Liberty – I grabbed some *okonomoyiaki* and *takoyaki* for dinner and headed to the party.[342]

When I showed up, DIGITALBOY and Restricted Throw greeted me with hugs and cheers, and when they went on at midnight the room just came alive. As I looked around, I realized that most people there were wearing TIME MENACE t-shirts, pins, and hats. At first glance it seemed almost cult-ish, but it turns out that friends of TIME MENACE designed and made all the goods, ultimately creating sense of community that just simply didn't exist in the Tokyo scene. People working together to support one another, without undertones of competition and resentment? How novel! And the music… with playful, bouncy, danceable grooves laid down in alternation or playful sparring by each of the members – and accompanied by shouts and hoots in the audience – I couldn't help but dance, laugh, and smile. And it wasn't just me: everyone was grooving out, completely lost in the music and atmosphere. By the time their hour and a half set ended, which had flown by, I felt transformed – completely uplifted and energized, having literally danced all my problems away.

After returning to Tokyo two weeks (plus four parties and five hang-out sessions) later, something in me changed: the wall I'd built around myself to stay sane in Tokyo was starting to crumble. Suddenly I was looking for any reason to see the TIME MENACE crew, taking night busses down to Osaka on a moment's notice, feeling that after all these years in Japan, I'd finally found my *mawari*: (inner) circle of friends who accept one another unconditionally. At

[342] Classic Osaka fare: cabbage pancakes and battered pieces of octopus shaped like a ball.

last, a group of Japanese people who finally saw Japan (and America) the way I do: as places with preciously kitschy pockets of truth amongst the bulldozing forces of global capitalism, which we could talk about freely without any microa415ressions toward my "foreignness" despite having spent so much time in Japan. I always believed they existed somewhere, and at last my wish came true—and suddenly here we all were, hanging out! At a gig they played at the Maishima Music Festival in Osaka, Restricted Throw said that our *#en* runs deep, and that he was excited about seeing where our connection takes us; DIGITALBOY extended the group's tour that May so that I could spend time with them upon returning from a concurrent trip to Okinawa. Feeling like my musical relationship with Japan was now progressing at warp speed, it was at this time that I realized that I had to conclude my professional (and personal) time in Japan in Osaka, spending time with these musicians in everyday circumstances, just as I had with the Tokyo crew.

Which isn't to say that I didn't form deep connections with DE$TINYBRINK and the gang—in fact, the Mad Scientist declared at one of their shows in Osaka that I was their number one fan, their groupie, except without… you know. But hey, they "needed a groupie, anyway!" Thanks..?[343]

By June of 2015 I had settled into my place in Osaka: a bedroom in a grimy, Chinese-run bed-and-breakfast/dormitory in the heart of an old-style red light district, with old ladies sitting stoops of quiet buildings with those telltale small white signs, as the women upstairs wait to be bought. In the area of the notoriously gritty Ikuno-ward nestled behind Tsuruhashi – Osaka's

[343] Mr. Drum Machine, on the other hand, is less blunt in his interactions, and always a pleasure to see. Mikey, you're the best!

Koreatown – I was surrounded by late-night Korean karaoke joints, mah-jon415 parlors, and seedy *sunakku*: "snack bars" run by an old "mama" who sooths patrons' fevered brows with whisky and beer. Despite the way this neighborhood appears on paper, I absolutely loved it: quiet, everyone was personable (even the madams, with whom I grew friendly after continually running into them at the *sento* public bath house around the corner), and the down-and-dirty aspects of it all were quite charming. Osaka felt *real*, particularly in comparison to the Mad City, with its manic, anime-esque "happy happy!" façade while people leap to their death in front of the trains. With my new digs, I also found the unexpected glimpse into contemporary enactments of structural racism against Korean and Chinese people living in Japan to be fascinating. With a bicycle that a friend had lent me (thank you, Nao-chan!), I could cruise around town – and in Osaka, you can bike from one end of the city to the other in less than an hour.

The underground culture was also much different than in Tokyo, and in ways I could have never known without living there. While some aspects are similar – musicians gathering at a home-base club during non-party hours to play music and hang out – musicians also got together at each other's houses to do the same thing. While this may have gone on in some circles in Tokyo, for the most part it seemed that the crowd I ran with spent time together at the club, while keeping home life separate. DE$TINYBRINK's rehearsals even took place at the tiny basement club west of Shinjuku, following a set schedule. There was an element of formality, or perhaps of professionalism, that shaped the way the Tokyo scene operated that didn't seem to exist in the same way in Kansai. This has to do with the sheer size of Tokyo, where getting from one part of the city to another can take over two hours one-way—in

contrast, you can get to the entirely separate city and prefecture of Kyoto in 45 minutes from Osaka.

Which I did often, as DIGITALBOY and TMB were based there; Resthrow, living in nearby Takarazuka, also came to hang out often at TMB's house which, in the summer of 2015, was the hang-out spot. Parties were scarcer in Kansai than they were in Tokyo, as there are simply far fewer clubs. To make music and practice, friends had to get together at one another's apartments, or the friend who *had* an apartment at all (as many of these underground musicians either live with their parents or crashed with their friends for free, since they couldn't afford rent on their own). Spending time with DIGITALBOY, Resthrow, TMB, PACO, and anyone else who came through the Party House, showed that these musicians were (and are) willing to risk material and financial security to play music in underground spaces.

They live(d) party to party, which begs the question: what exactly *is* a party?

Parties as Resistance Enacted

Japan and Sweden share something in common, other than sleek design and national healthcare: both nations have laws against dancing in public spaces. Japan's anti-dance law was first imposed in 1947 under the weak guise of discouraging prostitution -- although the law against prostitution seems to be far less enforced than that about dancing. This law states that only licensed dance clubs could operate if granted a special "dance license", and in some cases, dancing and liquor sales past midnight is forbidden even if a club held this license. Although the anti-dance ban was temporary revised in 2015 to allow dancing at clubs without any permission, it is currently being reinstated, with 2018 already seeing several important

underground dance clubs in Tokyo being shut down. Aoyama Hachi – a favorite spot of many artists I know – was investigated under a noise complaint, and after having been discovered breaking the law forbidding all-night liquor sales, has been ordered to shut down.[344] Bullet's in Nishi-Azabu, another favorite, has also been recently shut down under the auspices of noise. According to the Bullet's announcement on Twitter, they were looking forward to celebrating their twentieth year in operation in 2019, but are closing due to *takusan no riyuu kara*… : "for many reasons…"[345] Even Bar Ringtail has been subjected to police scrutiny, with Buzzfeed Japan featuring the club's surveillance as a prototypical example of the anti-dance law in action.[346]

Although Tokyo is seeing its share of clubs shut down, or having its dance and alcohol sales monitored, Osaka has been hit particularly hard by Japan's anti-dance law. This is perhaps also due in part to the city's relatively small size: Tokyo, boasting several urban centers, is dauntingly vast and difficult to monitor, whereas most of Osaka's night life is concentrated in a single area (the neighboring Shinsaibashi/Americatown/Unagidani/Horie districts). Past haunts, such as the aforementioned Club Lunar and its former neighbor Grand Café, have since been shut down. According to the Japan Times, the owner of a Shinsaibashi-based club called Noon was actually arrested for allowing patrons to dance and drink past midnight which, along with Aoyama Hachi's recent closing, has contributed to growing domestic debates in Japan about

[344] See: https://jp.residentadvisor.net/news.aspx?id=40898
[345] [たくさんの理由から…]：See:https://twitter.com/BULLETS_EN
[346] [踊ってるね？] See:
https://www.buzzfeed.com/jp/ryosukekamba/Ringtail?utm_term=.dlEOGKo1Ak#.nsDkA7y5DZ

this law, and what, exactly, it's trying to achieve. The headline reads, "[You]are dancing, are you not?" [347]

Important to note is that not all clubs are at risk— the clubs that have been shut down are smaller spaces, in part due to the anti-dance law's stipulation that performance spaces be of a certain size in order to operate. But why are the smaller clubs being targeted, when the larger clubs are arguably louder, more rambunctious, more predatory toward women, and harder to monitor? The Japanese government originally revised the anti-dance law in preparation for the upcoming 2020 Tokyo Olympics, so that visitors to Japan can "have fun" – and to boost Japan's image for international tourists.[348] These smaller spaces are not accommodating for big-name artists – European DJs, say, that the Japanese government's preoccupation with the Western Gaze deems as helping Japan seem more cosmopolitan – and are instead aimed at supporting underground endeavors that simply cannot earn as much revenue as the bigger clubs. This ultimately demonstrates the Japanese government's fixation on foreign approval of curated, profitable aspects of "Japanese culture" at the expense of… well, Japanese culture.

This leads to my overarching hypothesis for this section, which is that parties enact resistance as gathering spaces for that people question mainstream (Japanese) socio-cultural values, including uniformity, hierarchical obligation, and working as a salaryman. In his exegesis

[347] See: https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2017/06/22/music/one-year-changes-anti-dancing-law-clubbers-hopeful/#.WndAssmQyUk
[348] Ibid

of underground dance music in Tijuana, Mexico, Alejandro Madrid understands parties as a means of community formation. He writes:

> Partying allows for individuals not only to interact and establish social relations with people who share similar musical tastes, but also to participate in a process of nonrepressive sublimation, a collective *relajo* (relaxing, amusing activity) that ascribes new personal, social, and political meanings to urban spaces seemingly conquered by hegemony.[349]

Of course, parties in the Japanese underground also operate as a gathering space for like-minded individuals seeking refuge from this hegemony. In targeting underground clubs, the anti-dance law, then, is a direct attack on subcultural values, operating under the (oftentimes correct) assumption that smaller nightclubs are hubs for drugs like marijuana and LSD, both of which are extremely illegal in Japan.[350] For instance, police often drove by one particular club I frequented during my fieldwork in Tokyo, unsolicited by any noise complaints, due to their suspicions of the activity going on inside. While there were drugs at many of the parties I went to, particularly in Tokyo, the appeal is not necessarily getting "messed up" (although that certainly existed), but rather these drugs are thought to offer users: insights into a different way of life, where love is – not materialism – is the answer. Cliché though this may be, the connection between drugs and an expanded understanding of the world seem to go hand-in-hand in many circles of Japan's underground. In fact, some DJs, gentle and kind though they were, doubled as drug dealers.

[349] Madrid, *Nortec Rifa! Electronic Dance Music from Tijuana to the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 122.

[350] Indeed, possession of marijuana in Japan is deemed as serious a crime as the possession of meth. See: https://www.elitedaily.com/envision/heres-happens-get-caught-weed-japan/1434132

Although, to be fair, others were addicts with hijacked minds who were willing to undercut everyone to make enough money for their various bad habits…

As discussed, the underground is defined by a spectrum of subscription to certain principles, most notably anti-capitalist sentiments and a resistance to mainstream conformity. Beyond the chance to maybe take some drugs, parties are an important site of sociality for people with these values, not least because the underground scene is largely comprised of people who general work only part-time jobs or in freelance (usually in computer programming, but occasionally related to music production). Although the discussion of capitalist aesthetics shows that scholarship tends to posit dwindling work force of salarymen as a crisis, the underground perspective lauds a person's decision to leave the workforce to focus on creative efforts full-time. When PACO, for instance, decided to leave his job in customer service to devote himself to making music full-time, his Facebook post announcing the news received dozens of likes and supportive comments from friends. Essentially, this rejection of mainstream societal life models has led these people underground parties, which often happen in the middle of the night partly due to what nighttime represents: a timeframe uninterrupted by society at large. In fact, the Mad Scientist, DIGITALBOY, PACO, TMB, and Resthrow all regularly stay up all night, even when there isn't a party. What's more, underground parties are often, in fact, underground in subterranean clubs hidden from sight (and sound) from society—not least because of the anti-dance law, and the risk that's engendered by throwing a party with dancing to begin with.

But much like the fact that underground music doesn't have a specific sound per se, and is instead influenced while I see as the meaning music gains through context and performance,

parties – enacted resistance though they are – are different across Japan. Tokyo and Osaka have very different parties, because the different paces of mainstream society between these notoriously different cities begets a different underground Gestalt. Yet because Novak leads his ethnographic inquiry from the perspective of sound and materiality, he misrepresents Japanese underground music, categorizing it as "Japanoise" despite the differences that exist within the domestic underground, while glossing over the fact that the straight-up noise music he describes is no longer the cutting-edge. In accounting for Osaka's character, he writes that the city boasts a comparatively "outgoing expressive character" that has influenced the sound of its underground music scene:

> Osaka's citizens have historically been recognized within Japan for their outspoken aggressiveness, direct local language, hedonistic enjoyment of leisure, and outrageous sense of humor. Given this outgoing expressive character, it was not surprising that extreme, intensely performative musical styles were associated with the city. Osaka encouraged edgier, more experimental attitudes, as well as amateur performance spaces and recording spaces.[351]

While it's true that Osaka, and the Kansai region more generally, has a more *gaikouteki* (outward, unreserved) character when compared to Tokyo, the Kansai region is actually more politically conservative than Tokyo. Yoshimura Hirofumi, the current mayor of Osaka, is not affiliated with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's Liberal Democratic Party, but is part of a new political party known as the Japanese Restoration Party (*Nippon isshin kai*), which favors limited government and neoliberal economic policies.[352] Right-wing political trucks, brandishing the

[351] Novak, *Japanoise,* 11.

[352] According to Wikipedia, Yoshimura also threatened to end Osaka's sister-city relationship with San Francisco due to the American city's idea to put a statue of a Korean "Comfort Woman" sex slave that "serviced" Japanese soldiers during the Pacific War.

Imperial Japanese Navy Flag and blasting military marches from loudspeakers, seem to drive around Osaka with striking frequency when compared to Tokyo.

Given the threat that the anti-dance law thus poses in the city, and with most of its nightclubs concentrated in a few districts, the underground music scene seems to embrace the region's positive attributes – friendliness, comparative directness, and the importance placed on community[353] -- in their parties. Entrance fees are lower than they are in Tokyo, hovering around 1500 yen at a smaller club and 2000 at the larger venues, but are often free for smaller parties. People shout, laugh, and dance in Osaka, staying up well into the next morning and ordering a pizza if the mood so strikes. It only makes sense that the underground scene sees DJs and musicians playing neo-house music, inflected with the raw edges of the currently popular acid sound, like Restricted Throw's sound, or DJ's will play vintage house and disco straight-up, ala DIGITALBOY. The music is positive, and helps to cultivate the sense of community that underpins the region's local culture.

Similarly, it makes sense that Tokyo's underground scene is darker, more post-human—because that is how Tokyo is. DE$TINYBRINK's overstimulated wash of electronica, CIRCUSCOYOTE's driving cacophony of mechanized rhythms that become nearly melodic in nature: here, the musicians are coping with the overwhelming energy of Tokyo by staking control—and by letting totally loose, lighting electric pianos on fire and the like. The scene may not be as overtly about togetherness– no one's ordering pizza at my secret spot in Tokyo -- but

[353] People in Osaka are notoriously *osekkai*: nosey. It comes out in small ways, like when a shopkeeper tries to have an in-depth conversation with you about postwar American-Japanese relations when you're just trying to dig though the used clothing racks… whereas in Tokyo, you'll just get stared at from behind a corner where they don't think you can see them (but you still can).

neither is Tokyo, the Concrete Jungle, home to 38 million anonymous souls, all just trying to find a way through the maze. And even if we're more isolated at the Tokyo clubs, more recklessly throwing our bodies around compared to the smoother corporeal gestures encouraged by Osaka's good-vibes neo-vintage sound, we at least agree on one thing: that we're all alienated somehow.

Interesting to note is that Tokyo's underground is more performance based, with musicians playing drum machines, synthesizers, or actual drums (as in CIRCUSCOYOTE), whereas Kansai's scene seems to have more DJs: those who play records or CDs on turntables, mixing the sounds together and making smooth, interesting transitions from one song to the next. The different styles speak to the different moods of each scene, each city. Tokyo's futuristic post-humanism, where (physical, mental, emotional) space is constantly encroached upon by the ceaseless noise of the city, is made into musical metaphor through synthesizers that musicians manipulate themselves. That's what made the Mad Scientist so compelling—as he plugged and unplugged that Korg synthesizer, he was destroying and rearranging his lifeworld in Tokyo. Similarly, it makes sense that many in Kansai's underground scene use physical artifacts, hunting for cheap records in the city's remaining kitschy record shops run by *obaachan* ("grandmas"), or from mix CDs made by a friend. Indeed, these artifacts are simply easier to find in Osaka.

On DJs

All of this leads to a final meditation: what, exactly, is a DJ, and how are they central to underground resistance? For one, they are master manipulators of social atmosphere,

performing in tandem with the audience; DeNora sums it up with the quip, "the ability to exploit's music's social powers is fundamental to any disc jockey's craft."[354] In fact, working in tandem with the audience is so important to some DJs that they adjust their style completely depending on their venue. DIGITALBOY, for one, panicked when he opened for my experimental music show "Peripheral Encounters" that juxtaposed avant-garde pianism with Japanese underground electronica, and played something that was appropriate for the venue and crowd (the somewhat formal Carriage House Café in Ithaca, New York, with an audience comprised mainly of by graduate students and professors).[355]

At the same time, as purveyors of music they are also able to influence the way one interacts with her body. Kai Fikentscher points out that dancing bodies in underground clubs is a significant activity, as it "has the potential to liberate the self (mind/body) from dominant modes of thinking and behavior."[356] He writes,

> [D]ancing in the underground goes beyond the translation of auditory signals into bodily movement is the manifestation of possibility, the option, or the attempt to step outside the restrictions, conventions, and norms of the world beyond the doors of the dance venue. The intensity of audio and visual signals… is apt, indeed designed, to lead to other-than-everyday sensations on the part of the dancer. This feeling of otherworldliness, particularly when combined with the heightened physical energy of dancing, is essential to the 'disco' experience.[357]

[354] DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 17.
[355] See "Peripheral Encounters" for details.
[356] Kai Fikentscher, *'You Better Work!',* 65.
[357] Ibid, 75.

Indeed, it is because underground DJs and electronic dance musicians in general encourage the audience to engage with their bodies – the same site of Foucauldian disciplinary control, as discussed in the chapter on J-pop and the aesthetic of capitalism – is countercultural. In dancing (or stomping) to music, the DJ introduces a route by which dancers can to remap what Bourdieu identifies as a habitus: the embodied way of being that is influenced by our personal archaeologies, comprised of work, home, family, and so forth. The countercultural power that the underground musician carries is quite substantial.

Which is precisely why the anti-dance law targets these smaller clubs. Good thing it doesn't apply to traditional music and dance as well, which similarly demands that dancers abandon their habitus for one developed entirely free of capitalist logic…

To conclude this section, I'll use the great "Tokyo vs. Osaka" debate as a metaphor. The two cities have been pitted against each other for hundreds of years, back when Tokyo was still Edo, and when Edo had Kabuki and Osaka had *joruri* puppet theater. Kabuki was lewd and unrestrained, whereas *joruri* was at once more formal and more casual, influenced by even older theatrical traditions like *noh* and the travelling tunes of the popular *shamisen* lute. Once the Meiji Restoration came along and re-defined what music meant, these performativities became canonized as "traditional heritage" rather than living arts. Now, the great Tokyo vs. Osaka debate is perhaps most palatable – literally -- in food culture. While Tokyo is dignified and cosmopolitan, with East-meets-West fusion spots and master sushi restaurants, Osaka is down-and-dirty, with *takoyaki* spherical octopus pancakes (commonly known in English as the somewhat misleading "octopus balls") sold on every other street corner by some old guy with five teeth left. Then, there are the characters of these two cities: Tokyoites are restrained and

sophisticated, whereas Osaka is bawdy and lewd, willing to do anything for a laugh (indeed many of Japan's top comedians are based in the Osaka area).

And, here, we have these cities' underground music. In Tokyo, it's dark and driving, whereas in Osaka, it's fun and groovy. But much like the father explains in My Big Fat Greek Wedding, explaining that their family's last name means "orange," and her (non-Greek) husband-to-be's last name means "apple," in the end, they're all just fruit—and in the end, this music is all just… Japanese.

Maybe. But either way, this music -- along with the popular and traditional styles discussed -- is the music being performed in Japan today. Whether or not this makes it "Japanese" is a moot point.

Plus, Osaka's up-and-coming DJ Circle is spinning some slick, dark beats that are increasingly relatable, even in this notoriously "laid back" city. Maybe Osaka and Tokyo have more in common than what appears at a first listen. In fact, as the underground networks overlap with anticapitalistic principles -- and as the ceaseless march of the capitalist aesthetic that is potentially transforming all of Japan into a Tokyo suburb creates a heightened sense of urgency in the underground[358] -- it only makes sense.

Inevitable Negotiations with Capitalism: The Underground Economy

At the risk of creating an all-too-neat binary in which capitalism is cast as the looming other in the face of underground resistance, I once again rely on the logic of social theorist Slavov Zizeck. In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*, he explains that resistance itself is a

[358] See: https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/sep/30/-sp-shinkansen-bullet-train-tokyo-rail-japan-50-years

natural result of both the inevitable existence and homogonizing forces of a so-called mainstream. Identifying resistance as a "passion for the Real," he writes:

> The very core of the 'passion for the Real' is this identification with – this heroic gesture of fully assuming – the dirty obscene underside of Power: the heroic attitude of 'Somebody has to do the dirty work, so let's do it!', a kind of mirror-reversal of the Beautiful Soul which refuses to recognize itself in its result.[359]

In underground Japan, the "dirty work" Zizeck conceptualizes can be understood as a blind commitment to living outside "the system." Many of these individuals risk financial and material security to "focus on their creative pursuits,"[360] despite how difficult it is to get by with so little in Japan – where a single peach can cost you 500 yen (or roughly five dollars), and where a tiny room with no furniture in Tokyo can cost you 100,000 yen (roughly $1000) per month. DIGITALBOY, for instance, has spent his life attempting to support himself solely with entrance fees, mix cd sales, and production gigs for friends; he primarily lives with his parents in the countryside and crashes with generous friends whenever he has gigs in Osaka and Tokyo. Before landing a working-holiday visa in Britain, Resthrow lived with his parents and stayed up all night making sound collages in his childhood bedroom; the Mad Scientist wrote album reviews for an online magazine to eek by, while staying up all night on his Korg synthesizer whenever possible; TMB makes just enough money to pay his own rent with freelance computer programming gigs, while staying up all night with his Tempest synthesizer (and later, making drones). Such lifestyle choices demonstrate a nearly foolhardy dedication to living life

[359] Zizek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*, 62.
[360] The most common explanation from those underground musicians who attempt to completely opt out of society.

as, essentially, a Marxian species-being who attempts to transcend his or her status as mere "worker." After all,

> … the worker, who for twelve hours weaves, spins, drills, turns, builds, shovels, breaks stones, carries loads, etc – does he consider this twelve hours'… as a manifestation of his life, *as* life? On the contrary, life begin for him where this activity ceases, at table, in the public house, in bed. The twelve hours' labour, on the other hand, has no meaning for him… but as *earnings*, which bring him to the table, to the public house, into bed.[361]

Some in the scene do, however, work full-time jobs, perhaps because their parents are not willing to support them and therefore have to be self-sufficient. Many of these individuals work in fields having either nothing to do with formal training they might have received in school, or work in semi-creative fields like graphic design that make the day-to-day "bearable." Others run their own store or performance space to encourage up-and-coming artists, either through inheriting the space or by working full-time to save up enough funds to open up shop on their own. While those who run small clubs or record stores, such as the clothing/record/tape shop ASSHOLE in Osaka and my secret spots in both cities (shh!), are committed to supporting those who are just starting out, those who value security tend to view the lifestyle of musicians who refuse to work less charitably. An Osaka-based DJ who works full-time as a real estate agent (and one day a week at a record shop) confided, "It would be great if I could be a DJ and work at the record store full-time," pausing, "but the stress of having to scrounge for a place to live and for food like that would take away from my music." He added, "It's also *mazui* (literally, "[in] bad taste") to essentially rely on friends and family so that you can live life that way. It's their choice, not mine."[362] Another DJ friend explained, "Relying on

[361] Marx Engels Reader 205
[362] Conversation, October 2017, Osaka

friends to treat you to dinner or drinks just because you have income… *yokunai yo* ("it's really not OK.").[363] Worth pointing out is that these two DJs are not as active in the scene, either as performers or listeners.

Freelance Computer Programming	Graphic Design	Part-time Job (*baito*)	Manual Labor	Salaryman	Run Own Store/Club	No Job
xxx	xxx	xxx	xx	xxx	xxxx	xxxx

Social Media Economy

Regardless of whether these DJs and performers have full-time jobs, nearly all of them push their work – which oftentimes includes zines, photography, screen-printing, and jewelry design in addition to musical performances and mix tapes/CDs -- through the vehicle of social media. In fact, parties are largely advertised through online flyers that are designed either by someone in the show (ala DIGITALBOY, Restricted Throw, and the Mad Scientist) or by other creative friends in the scene. Online flyers are the most important way of getting word out about shows, more so than the physical flyers that do still exist on the counters of clubs, but simply cannot circulate as fast or as far. I learned this quickly when I arrived in Tokyo to conduct my fieldwork; before, I had quit all social media, but after hanging out at Module and only having limited access to shows, I realized that I not only needed a Facebook account again, but

[363] Conversation, July 2015, Osaka

also Twitter: a "cooler" alternative to Facebook, and many DJs' preferred method of building up anticipation for their shows by creating an attractive online persona-- at least, that's true for *some* of the DJs. Instagram is also an extremely important tool for underground artists, not only for sharing flyers but also for showcasing the amateur photography that takes place at shows—which then helps boost the image of performers and venues alike.

Returning to Zizeck's idea that resistance to the looming presence of "the man" is, itself, a key component of "the man," the social media economy of the underground presents some interesting contradictions. For one, the very desire to publicly document one's counter-culturalism is through one of the most sneakily lucrative industries on Earth -- with algorithmically determined advertisements based on content that users write and even speak about[364] -- is a blind spot that begs careful analysis. Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn explore this contradiction in their book *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation*, where they note:

> On the one hand… this yearning to speak oneself to camera suggests a desire for the mark of authenticity, for the social legitimization of one's existence. In this sense, the process of revelation is partly shaped by a self-conscious absorption in the emotions, desires, needs, pains and memories that the contemporary individual, attuned to a popularized psychoanalytic discourse, uses to understand his or her location in the world… On the other hand, the desire to be watched, to be witnessed by others uncovering one's intimate identity and even everyday rituals of cooking, eating, conversing, competing or sleeping reveals the craving for an observer to witness the minutiae of one's social performance… This indicates the importance with which the media has now become associated with social identification.[365]

In fact, was one of the most disillusioning facets of underground Japan, to me: that so many of these DJs and performers are keenly interested in creating a projection of their cool, "anti-

[364] See: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2017/03/07/why-the-cia-is-using-your-tvs-smartphones-and-cars-for-spying/?utm_term=.ced0d640ba19

[365] Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn. *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation* (London and New York Wallflower Press, 2005), 101.

mainstream" identity in one of the most conformist ways possible was incredulous to me. If you're so anti-capitalism, why are you pushing for people to come to your shows and buy your mix CDs and zines? Why are you trying to portray yourself in a certain light if you are also trying to deliver the message that it doesn't matter what other people think?

Indeed, DJs and performers commonly share links to their SoundCloud, MixCloud, and/or Band Camp pages, or other websites they've created for an important purpose: to sell their stuff, some of whom rely on these sales to live. Social media has thus become a kind of black market for underground musicians so that they may earn enough money to get by: a way to negotiate with the fundamental demands of life in capitalist society (i.e. having any amount of money, no matter how small), without sacrificing that lofty principle of placing artistic expression above all else. At the same time, this negotiation with capitalism creates some unsavory blind spots, namely that underground musicians who use social media to promote themselves end up relying on the money of those friends and their social network who *do* earn income. There was a particularly illustrative moment of this phenomenon in 2016 when DIGITALBOY, TMB, and Restricted Throw came to the United States in 2016, which was made possible with countless hours of grant and email-writing on my end. Teaching a course I had designed at Cornell while working part-time as a poster-hanger for the Music Department *and* waitressing at a Chinese restaurant to make ends meet, I came home from work utterly exhausted one night to find the guys sprawled on the floor of the living room, playing with

computers and synthesizers. Before I even set my stuff down, they asked: "What's for dinner?"[366]

Of course, those who support the otherwise incomeless artists by buying their products do so of their own volition.[367] No matter how poor, I've never seen an underground artist straight-up hustle their friends for money; it's simply uncouth. At the same time, a Marxist analysis of this set of exchanges points to what could be interpreted as a fundamental hypocrisy of the underground economy. "Capital," Marx explains, "consists not only of means of subsistence, instruments of labour and raw materials, not only of material products; it consists just as much of *exchange values*. All the products of which it consists are *commodities.* Capital is, therefore, not only a sum of material products; it is a sum of commodities, of exchange values, of *social magnitudes*."[368] In relying on their social networks for financial support, underground artists send the message, even if unknowingly, that the time they spend making music or playing at parties is more important than the time that those who work exchange for money.

[366] To be fair, DIGITALBOY has since changed his relationship to money, in large part thanks to this trip. Also, this interaction taught me a lot about cultural differences between Japan and America when it comes to the art of hosting. Whereas "make yourself at home and help yourself" is the standard form of politeness in America, Japanese hosts wait on their guests hand and foot, which I not only wasn't able to do here, but wouldn't have done anyway because… I'M NOT JAPANESE. You people are adults and I'm not your mother; get a clue and find dinner for yourselves.

[367] Of course, there are "cults of personality" in the underground that ultimately enable some of these performers to live leech-like lifestyles. Calling someone a "genius" and giving them hand-outs and free passes for acting like a child because they are supposedly *tokushuu sugiru* ("too… different") to make it in mainstream Japanese society not only drains those who support him, but ultimately hurts this artist himself (and he shall remain anonymous). The result is that he's a middle-aged spoiled brat who has no idea how to relate to people in a genuine human way – that is, with empathy – and because he is demanding and entitled, and deeply wounded, humbling himself with work that everyone else has to do is out of the question. And so he moves from scene to scene, person to person, to find someone willing to prioritize his dreams in a way he can't do himself.

[368] Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 208.

But perhaps this is an important counter-meta-argument: that the exchange value for art *is* higher than that of labor. This ultimately proves the point that one can never really escape capitalist forces, but can only really negotiate: we're born as participants in this exhausting and as Etienne and Balibar pint out, one can never truly "opt out." So while the social media economy may not be ideal, for many it operates as an interim solution until the dream of getting rich off of one's output, moving into a commune with friends, and never worrying about money again comes true.[369]

And while it's certainly possibly (and in some cases likely) that many of these underground artists are not versed in Marxist discourse and might, in fact, just be lazy, spoiled, entitled, embittered brats who are trying to be cool while operating from crippling superiority complexes[370], some of the underground artists I know have spoken about this double-bind of social media with sensitive awareness. Indeed, I have not met a single underground musician who doesn't have at least a Twitter or Instagram account, no matter how "anti-system" they claim to be otherwise. Commenting on this unsavory reality, Mitsuki – DJ and owner of the overflowing record shop Vole Music in Osaka[371] – confided,

> Social media is… you know, it's not exactly good for social relations. It takes people out of the present, and it's all about image. It's creepy, and it's weird that people build themselves up on social media for whatever reason. But since I run the [record] shop… I mean, it's inevitable—I *have* to use it to stay relevant. The same thing goes for shows… if there isn't an [online] flyer, [I'm] worried that there'd be no way for anyone to know about it. It's unfortunate, but it is what it is, I suppose…[372]

[369] Many of my friends in Japan wax wistful about such a possibility; I, too, see its appeal…
[370] Really the same thing as an inferiority complex. After all, anyone who tries to bring you down is already below you.
[371] Which became something of a second home during the fall of 2017. Thanks for everything, Mitsuki and Shindo.
[372] Conversation, Mitsuki-kun, MOLE MUSIC, Osaka, November 2017.

So while the underground's negotiation with capitalism might make a cynic sneer, citing an inability for anyone to truly resist "the man," a more sympathetic perspective sees (some of) these artists doing the best they can with what's been handed to them. Japan, more so than even the United States, is a pedigree-based society where not having a degree, or experience (and thus connections) in the work force, greatly hinders one's chance at financial or material security. These artists, some of whom have sacrificed everything (despite relying on friends and family, in many cases) to produce their content, show a commitment to their art that risks even legal consequence with Japan's anti-dance laws. Indeed, it are these principles, and the sociality that surrounds them, that makes music underground—not it's sound.

The risk factor is important here. That's why I believe that some guy bloop-blorping around on a synthesizer in a gentrified neighborhood of Brooklyn, screen-printing ironic sayings onto American Apparel t-shirts while drinking 6 dollar cups of espresso, might not be *"*underground"-- even if it sounds the same as what's going on in Japan. What's *really* at risk for him?

Conclusion: The Limits of Resistance

Throughout this chapter, I have attempted to prove two main points: 1) that generic understandings of underground music as a particular kind of sound (noise-y, electronic, derived from dance music, more generally the music of DJs) is erroneous, because it 2) glosses over the fact that the underground is, in fact, defined by principles of explicit resistance. These are, mainly, to both question and reject the (Japanese) societal model that encourages people to go to school, go to college, and get a job as a salary(wo)man until life ends.

Yet while these principles are laudable, there are some blind spots so glaring in scope that they ultimately show that opting out of the capitalist system is all but impossible. In his essay "On the Problems of Capitalist Society, and the Way They're 'Solved'," Oscar Wilde identifies the most malicious aspect of the capitalist system to be its oppositional stress. He writes, "The industry necessary for the making of money is also very demoralizing. Man will kill himself with overwork in order to secure [capital]."[373] But considering that many underground musicians make life difficult for themselves by actively opting out of the system, what's the solution? Like Nishimonai, underground Japan is in constant negotiation with these forces that can resist, but can never truly transcend. After all, resistance would lose meaning (and grounds for existence) if there weren't something *to* resist.

In discussions of underground music, then – and really any music, as this dissertation has attempted to show – I conclude that social context gives the music its meaning. Under this logic, the notion of aesthetics are no longer determined by sound or visuals alone, but by the greater societal circumstances that give these sounds meaning. The robotic beeping in a convenience stores or at the train station, then, provides a sonic platform for DE$TINYBRINK to enact resistance; the anti-dance law gives DIGITALBOY's manicured house music sets political import.

[373] Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: Six Volumes in One* (New York: Black's Readers Service Company, 1927), 492.

Peripheral Encounters: A Series of Personal/Social/Musical Experiments

For Satya

Experiment

I. Research questions: what would it look like if I brought together my world in Japan with my world in America – the "field" with the home base?

II. Experiment design: apply for grants and write emails to pretty much every department in the humanities and social sciences on Cornell's campus to get funds for airfare for my Japanese underground musician friends and to offset venue fees; plan a series of concerts where they perform with my American, classically trained pianist friends

III. Hypothesis: it will be an important, life-changing, at times uncomfortable but ultimately rewarding experience for all involved

IV. Results: TBD after subsequent experiments; see sub-experiments below

**** Prelude: The Guest Lecture**

Suddenly, somehow, the last day of class arrived, which meant that our guests from Japan had also arrived. Yes, the underground DJs were coming to my first-year writing seminar to… just be there. They'd get the whole class after a few housekeeping details: finishing up final presentations, handing out the final essay assignment, closing remarks.

They were trying to keep it *so* cool, and it pissed me off a little to be honest, but there*'s* no way that they weren't a little nervous. After all, they were completely out of element. Two college grads, one high school grad, and the ones who *did* finish a university degree did so in Japan—where, more so than the US, students party for four years after passing an arduous entrance exam process while working part-time jobs to earn enough money for booze and cool clothes.[374] But they all live in the floating world of underground Japan, where you don't work a "real" job on principle, where you live party to party, sleep all day and stay up all night, and scrounge for the mundane realities of everyday life, like money and food.

And then here they are at some fancy American university: an unexpected development of events which might normally run counter to the aforementioned "underground" principles, but yet the only way that they could possibly be here. It was my gesture of thanks for sharing their world with me in Japan the year before, particularly during the summer of 2015 when I jumped in with two feet and lived the underground lifestyle with them—quite literally during that last month when I decided to wing it and didn't secure my own living arrangements.[375] Bringing the guys to the States using money I wrote dozens of emails/several grant applications to obtain was of academic, ideological, and personal principle. As an ethnographer, this was an

[374] Of course, the author is fully aware that the same is true for American universities as well. The interesting point about this contrast, however, is that Japanese people seem to believe that American universities are more serious centers of learning and scholarship than domestic institutions. The Japanese musicians who visited Cornell echoed these sentiments on numerous occasions throughout their trip, notably when they were flabbergasted that our gig at the student center wouldn't have beer or overt drunkenness. On whole, it is safe to say that this is the conjecture of my Japanese interlocutors, and not one of my own concoction.

[375] "Homeless" may be a misleading term – I wasn't panhandling on the streets – but I had opted to not secure any place to stay on my own. I instead stayed with DJ friends who were more than willing to accommodate me (and were very supportive of my choice to "wing it"), and stayed in the seedy hotels within my budget when I needed private time. Although I wouldn't necessarily opt to be homeless again, always having a place to stay was deeply affirming of my relationship to Japan, which I have often feared is nothing but an illusion.

experiment with aims to stitch together all of my life-worlds as smoothly as possible through the safe-space of musical performance-- the first of which commenced in my class.

I was a little nervous, too.

I left it entirely up to the guys to do whatever they wanted for their 50 minutes save for their one duty, which was to give the students mix CDs that they'd paid for as part of the course materials. Two out of three remembered… the third, whose English is the most fluent, burned his mix CDs in class before taking the reins for the guest lecture… sigh. But he turned it around when he said:

"If you want to understand what we do, we need you to do just one thing. DANCE."

And so, on May 9th, 2016, the Cornell music building hosted its first – and most likely last – Japanese underground DJ dance party.

The Student Center Gig

Experiment 1a

I. Research questions: what is the place of music in society – in this case, music that, according to its makers, needs no explanation and should just be *felt*? How necessary is social media/advertising in generating an audience?

II. Experiment design: throw an unadvertised dance music party in the student center and see how students react – if they come, if they dance

III. Hypothesis: a few students from class will show up, and maybe some other people walking by will stop in

"Wait, *this* is the student center? I thought it would be outside! But at least there will be beer there, right?"[376]

Um, no. And do you really need a drunk audience?

"You didn't hang up signs?! There's no Facebook event? How is anyone supposed to come??"

Because there will be interesting electronic music blaring from Willard Straight Hall…

"You know, this building is a bit too nice… can we even play loudly here?"

Would you prefer to play in some smoke-stinking basement at 4am?

"Moving these heavy speakers around campus sure is a lot of work."

So was organizing this entire tour.

IV. Results: they each got to play for 45 minutes, which is about standard for their shows in Japan. Three students from class showed up, and danced on their own for the full two hours. A lot of students (around twenty) stopped to peer through the doors, listening for a few minutes outside before eventually walking away; given that it was study week,[377] students seemed particularly rushed. Others walked by without a second thought, often wearing headphones or earbuds. The building manager seemed entirely un-phased by the music, which was quite loud and reverberated in the hall.

[376] See Footnote 1.
[377] The week before finals when students catch up on back work and frantically cram for exams.

Near the end of the performance, a student – wearing pajamas – wandered in and joined us in dancing. After it was over, he said that this was some of the coolest music he'd ever heard, and asked why there weren't posters or advertising.

The Carriage House Gig, Ithaca, New York, 18/5/2016

Experiment 1b

I. Research questions: see program notes (below), written by the author

If you go to Angry Mom records in downtown Ithaca and ask for "classical music," you'll be escorted to the very back of the store to a dusty shelf of unmarked, unsorted boxes. And, if you're patient enough to sift through pops-concert performances of The Planets, best of-albums, and a curiously high volume of Gilbert and Sullivan, you *might* strike gold with a box set of Fauré piano quartets, or John Adam's *Nixon in China*. One could argue that this music doesn't have a large enough following to warrant its own shelf, but then there are entire sections for disco, electronic dance music, noise, grunge, reggae, Native American music, folk, and one shelf just for something called "Weird." What is said about classical music in the US if it remains hidden even in spaces dedicated to obscurity?

If you to go to Japan, Tower Records will have at least two floors dedicated to classical music. The Yamaha sheet music store in Ginza, Tokyo will also have multiple floors of rare, beautifully made scores, many of which cannot be found elsewhere. But dance music? Dancing in public spaces was technically illegal in Japan until 2014 (and rumor has it that the ban might be reinstated). Instead, this music is deep underground, oftentimes literally in that it's performed

between the first and last trains in basement music clubs not dissimilar from many new music venues in New York City. Like contemporary/classical music here in the US, it must be actively sought to be found.

Tonight's concert meditates on the hypothesis that classical music is to the US what dance music is to Japan: peripheral, on the edge of society. Classical, contemporary, underground, experimental, countercultural… what do these terms actually describe? By programming music that sounds very different yet are treated similarly, we encourage listeners to question the limits of genre, and to perceive similarities over differences. Somewhere in the frontier nestled between the unnecessarily rigid binaries of analog/digital, notated/improvised, classical/underground, and formal/informal, is a clear reminder that music does not sit neatly within the boxes we assign (and not just in record stores). What happens when you take away the boundaries?

II. Experiment Design: convince classical and new music pianist friends from Cornell to play a show with dudes from Japan who DJ and/or make electronic music, and hope for the best

Program:

1. R, Liszt transcription of a Schubert song
2. R, "Uncanny Valley," Nicholas Vines
3. A, "Fay ce que Voudras," John Zorn

Intermission: me, first moving away some chairs and then improvising on piano, so as to re-shape the atmosphere into something less formal than the typical “classical music” performance protocol

4. S, joining me for a dual improvisation, eventually ventures solo with his own DJ set (he chose to open with a song by Fela Kuti)

5. Y, playing a Tempest synthesizer (he established danceable beats, and sometimes played as loudly as possible as an apparent act of rebellion)

6. L, playing his own music (he chose a song he put together that says “fuck” over and over again)

III: Hypothesis: as per design, something totally unexpected will happen

IV. Results: Good attendance – a mix of graduate students, professors, new music fans, and friends – in large part due to the Music Department’s awareness (and significant funding) of this event. The atmosphere of the Carriage House – a converted hayloft with warm light, intimate seating close to the stage, and a fully stocked bar with decent wine – accommodated both halves of the program. R, in typical fashion, savored the moment and played what was asked of him, but didn’t seem to respond to the second half. A, of whom I asked a lot by asking him to perform the Zorn, which he hadn’t touched in years, had a large task – take the audience on a trip to outer space, essentially – and executed it well, especially given the time constraint: he re-learned this piece in a matter of weeks, while teaching a writing seminar for undergraduates

(#gradschool). S wasn't sure how to work the atmosphere; as a DJ, he responds to what he senses the audience wants, and opening the second half threw him off-kilter. Fela Kuti was a logical choice to make in a place like the Carriage House, but I was hoping for starker transition into electronica, which didn't come through. Y's set more in line with what I was hoping for, but since the guys only had around twenty minutes a piece, the effect didn't have the chance to re-establish mood; it felt disconnected. L, who puts together what he calls sound collages rather playing the music of others like a standard DJ, doesn't improvise or feed off atmosphere: he pushes play. His song choice reflected a stark unfamiliarity with American social protocol – this was his first time leaving Asia -- as well as nerves. About half the audience, including most of the professors, left during the second half.

Afterward, the bartender mentioned that he was told this show was going to be "out there," and that it turned out to be even more out there than he had anticipated – but in a good way. He then asked if we were performing together again.

****Interlude: The Lot 10 Gig, Ithaca 13/5/2016**

Things have a way of just working out, don't they? I booked this gig for the guys just a few weeks before with no trouble whatsoever, and they were going to get paid for it, too. I don't know what kind of sound equipment DJ's/computer musicians/synthesizer players need for a gig, but when we showed up unprepared (re: without a mixing board), the owner of Lot 10 called his friend and got us one twenty minutes later. There was no official facebook event or social media presence, but I told all of my friends (and to tell *their* friends) about the awesome party with three underground musicians from Japan.

It was a good-sized crowd, and it got better as the night went on and the dance floor became packed. The audience response was appropriate for each musician: professional dancers vogueing to S's smooth, disco/deep house set; bouncing and dancing to Y's Tempest synthesizer sounds; jumps and shouts for L's acid house arrangement. Although there were DJs and dancing, it felt much different than parties in Japan. There, perhaps because it's their home turf, the crowd revolves around the DJs, following their every sonic move, trying to talk or flirt with them after the set; if the DJ does something interesting, they shout for him (and it *is* usually "him"). Here, the crowd was interested in itself: friends laughing with and at each other, dancing to impress no one.

The biggest perk of hearing the guys play in the US was being able to dance without being engulfed by the stench of cigarettes. On the other hand, my phone got stolen—which would never happen in Japan.

The ISSUE Project Room Gig, Brooklyn, New York, 23/5/2016

Experiment 1c

I. Research Questions: now that we've spent 4000 dollars securing a venue and piano rental,[378] how can we improve upon the last gig for our New York City debut? In what ways will the other musicians adapt? With (limited) Facebook advertising this time around, who will show up?

II. Experiment Design: create a Facebook event a few days beforehand and try not to panic over

[378] Endless thanks to R and A, who used funds allocated to them for creative projects from the Department of Music.

the possibility that no one might show up. Adjust the line-up and the program (see below) to make the transition from classical to underground more smooth and pianism to electronica more stark, and hope for the best

1. R, Liszt transcription of a Schubert song

2. R, “Uncanny Valley,” Nicholas Vines

3. A, “Fay ce que Voudras,” John Zorn

4. A, “This is No Less Curious,” Louis Chiappetta (2016), New York Premiere

Intermission: with no need to move chairs given the set up in IPR, I waited a few minutes before improvising on piano; S joins briefly for a dual improvisation, eventually fading out for…

5. Y, playing a Tempest synthesizer and immediately establishing a new context. Shouted: “DANCE!” at the beginning of his set—which proved very effective

6. L, playing his own music (having astutely picked up some basics of American social protocol at this point, he chose a different song; because everyone was already dancing, his music made more sense)

7. S, closing this time around so he could observe the atmosphere before jumping in. He ended up playing a song of his own composition off his newly-released EP.

III. Hypothesis: as per design, something totally unexpected will happen – but will hopefully go more smoothly than the Carriage House gig?

IV: Results: A crowd of about twenty people comprised of friends, including friends of the Japanese musicians. The space was beautiful – an entirely empty, slightly dilapidated former train station -- and the manager let us use the house sound system free of charge. The piano and electronics reverberated heavily, creating an unexpectedly haunting atmosphere that was quite apropos. Most of the audience stayed for both halves this time around, and they – including two professional dancers -- were actually… dancing! A friend told me that I am "the weirdest person she knows," which I interpreted as evidence of the show's success at creating something entirely original and absolutely inimitable. The mother, aunt, and godmother of one of the featured composers were in attendance as well, and after the show, the mother congratulated S on his set: "That was wonderful -- you took me right back to my disco days!"

Conclusions:

- It is indeed possible to utilize university resources to bridge the gap between the field and the academy – although the work certainly doesn't end with the securing of funding
- In contemporary times, creating internet buzz about performances seems necessary to draw bigger crowds unless people are already aware of the event
- Putting together a collaborate concert means having to meet various sets of needs

    - Musicians each have uniquely demanding, sometimes competing needs that are expected to be met with the utmost sensitivity, care, and urgency… i.e. we take ourselves just a *wee* bit too seriously
- To perform in New York City, one needs: a) connections, b) a pre-established reputation, OR c) a venue project manager who is intrigued by your idea and is willing to take a risk on unknowns, d) thousands of dollars, e) organizational skills par excellence, f) patience par excellence
    - Due to these constraints, it's hard to put together truly experimental programming in New York
- Performing on piano requires dexterity, flexibility, and ultimately faith that your hands will work well with the instrument provided at your gig
- Pianos get out of tune by the end of a performance, especially if that performance includes slamming the desk and/or manipulating a Pyrex measuring cup and duct tape on top of the coils
- DJing or performing electronic music in public venues requires a network of speakers, and a knowledge of how to put them together
- DJs often work in direct tandem with the atmosphere of the audience, and feel uncomfortable with instructions of "play whatever you want"

Final Consideration: was the overall experiment of bringing these two worlds together a success?

Findings: sure, insofar that the worlds collided; see notes below

**** Coda: Dinner and a Show**

We had arrived in Brooklyn, finally. Totally frazzled from the tour – the planning, the peace-making, the money spent, the translating, the performance nerves, the anxiety about people showing up – I needed to decompress. And I was upset, because after all of this effort and labor, the guys hadn't yet acknowledged it in a way I could understand.

"*Otsukaresama desu!*"[379] they said to one another, after I struggled to find parking after the harrowing drive to New York from Ithaca.

But not to me. And that was a sort of final straw.

Why?! Why *can't you people just say thank you? My* American *friends would offer up gratitude in this situation, no questions asked. I don't care what kind of "cultural difference" this might be, or if this is some "underground" thing or whatever. How do you not say thank you?? Ugh, I need to be alone for a little while so I don't snap at anyone.*

So I told them as much and swiftly strode to the venue, caught up with the pianists, and sat in corner where no one would bother me. As the mood passed and I returned to center, I found myself feeling more charitable. OK, so the guys don't understand American social customs, and they probably never will because Japanese people are socialized into thinking that America is a place where you don't have to be polite – we don't have 敬語 *keigo* polite language in English, after all, and unlike the subtle communication used in Japan, we non-Japanese just *always* blurt out exactly what we're thinking at all times. Plus, I'm a woman, and

[379] This can mean "thanks for all of your hard work"; in other contexts, such as this one, this expression acknowledges effort, spent energy, and general arduousness.

there's no social obligation to acknowledge my active presence and participation in this situation, because only *men* are considered social actors in Japan.

But, it's my duty both personally and professionally to understand where they're coming from and not take it personally, so… as frustrating as it is to always have to see things from *their* perspective, where I'm probably a scary, demanding, selfish Medusa beast, it's done. It doesn't matter who is "right" in this situation. After all, I did invite them here, and this was all my idea. Time to move on.

Meanwhile, the pianists and the composer – who seemed understandably annoyed about how the planning for the night's show wasn't the most organized, given the thousands of dollars that putting on this show cost -- were talking about grabbing some dinner before the 7pm start time. Deciding on a cute Italian place around the corner, they headed off. I thought this would be a great opportunity to mend both sides of the equation –the pianists and the DJs, both halves of the show. What if we all ate together? So I set off to find the guys, treat them to dinner, and try to realize my fantasy of all us musicians hanging out together, getting along, and relaxing for the first time since their arrival from Japan.

They were outside taking a smoke break. "Jiru," they said, "thank you for driving us from Ithaca." *Wow,* I thought, *they finally get it..! Of course, I feel guilty about having had to ditch them because I was so angry about what I perceived as their total insensitivity, and for probably making them feel more outcasted than they already do, and they're all probably terrified of me at this point anyway, but dinner will be the chance to make everything better!*

We headed to the Italian place to meet the pianists and took a look at the menu. Entrees started at twenty dollars a plate… if I treated them, I'd be out *another* hundred dollars which, given the unexpected expenses throughout this entire tour, would just be too much. Too much money, too much stress, too much effort. Again. Sensing my tacit-yet-entirely-obvious stress, and not feeling comfortable in the quasi-fancy atmosphere of the Italian restaurant anyway, they started to fidget, adding, "You know what, there's a bagel joint a few doors down that's more our style."

And then they left.

So there I was, stuck in the middle – specifically, on Court Street in downtown Brooklyn between Queen Italian Restaurant and La Bagel Delight.

初 DJ の経験[380]

For Napalm-san

January 5th, 2017

Shibuya-ku, Tokyo

Experiment: Testing the Aesthetic Limits of the Japanese Underground

Personnel (in order of performance):

N

B

W (author)

T

2

I. Research questions: although the underground is generally understood as the site of (Japanese) society's most experimental music-making, why do most people opt to play electronic- or synthesizer-derived sounds? And if dance music is inherently countercultural in Japan due to the anti-dance law and the general conformist pressures of Japanese society, how

[380] *Hatsu DJ no keiken:* "[My] First [bodily] experience DJ-ing"

might non-electronic dance music be received? What would happen if someone played music not generally recognized as “cool”?

II. Experiment design: put together a show at the last minute at the basement hole-in-the-wall club. Make no social media flyers and create a set list comprised of whoever can show up in my circle of Tokyo-based DJ friends, and play selections from my vinyl collection – which is music not widely understood as “cool” and includes almost no electronica

III. Hypothesis: not sure, but hopefully people a) show up and b) dance

IV. Results: three DJ friends performed, one flaked at the last minute. The owner of the club also played a set. Most of the people I invited (the day of the show, classic me) showed up; beloved and faithful best friend L also came to the show with an acquaintance and stayed all the way until first train, even though underground music isn’t exactly their cup of tea. We started the evening with a celebratory beer for the New Year, and my Japanese friends heartily narrated the *kanpai* 乾杯 toast with a moving *okaerinasai:* “welcome back [to Japan].” N and T showed me how to use the turntables (which I had never touched before in my life) and the set was punctuated with cheers of encouragement. 2 posted live play-by-play updates of my set on Instagram, while T and B posted videos to both Instagram and Twitter. One of 2’s captions read, “W is born!” The profundity of this support made me understand the centrality of the underground social space to these musicians – that, to them, this is the center of the world, and

that their identity is dialogically constructed around and by it. And maybe it's my world now, too.

While T and N took naps at various points in my nearly 2-hour set, everyone else danced and responded otherwise to the music I played, not all of which is overtly danceable. Almost none of my selections were recognized by the audience; T and 2 were impressed that only two of my selections came up on the song identification app Shazam, while B said that she'd never before seen a DJ show like mine. A friend said that hearing and seeing my DJ set—which featured more or less constant dancing on my part – felt like she was watching me listen to music alone in my room.

Success! Intent realized!

Further Conclusions: DJing for nearly two hours flew by with swift bliss, like a good night's sleep where 9 hours feels like 20 minutes. The feeling of having people cheer and dance to music that means so much to you – songs that put a smile on your face even when you hate everything (Benny Goodman, "Down South Camp Meeting"), that are drippingly sensual without objectifying/degrading women in any way whatsoever (Ahmad Jamal, "All of You"), that you know will incite a reaction (Yoko Ono, "Kiss Kiss Kiss"), that will confuse everyone but are worth taking that risk for (Charles Ives, "The Alcotts" from the *Concord Sonata*) – is extremely empowering, and downright energizing (even at 3am!). As a DJ, you're in control of the room's atmosphere and have the power to get everyone dancing, and ultimately make everyone happy, by sharing your music-- by being one of the most intimate incarnations of yourself.

Immediately after finishing, I started mentally assembling a set list for my next show, packed with music that, though not “dance” music, I *know* can get people dancing!

Other notable selections from the Hatsu DJ set:

Queen, “Fun It”

Kanye West, “Champion” and “Flashing Lights” (a eulogy of sorts for the foolishly optimistic pre-*Yeezus* Kanye)

Supertramp, “Goodbye Stranger”

Sun Ra, “Dance of the Cosmo Aliens”

The Doors, “LA Woman”

Fats Waller, “African Ripples”

The Matsuyama Tour

For Mae-chan and Miso-chan

Arrival

You just think women are treated like dirt here, don't you?

Um… well, yes.

I took the train because I knew what the road trip down from Kyoto would look like. They'd control the music the entire way, without thinking of asking if there was something I might like to hear. They'd considerately stop for frequent bathroom breaks, but only so that they could smoke – a habit on which Americans and Japanese take a different socio-cultural stance.[381] There'd be no effort to include me in conversations, and so instead I'd have to sit quietly and wait for my turn to be included in the game of double-dutch that is Japanese social interaction: observe, see the pace, get ready, jump in—and jump out once you sense that your time is up.

It's not because they're rude. It's because they're Japanese men. They are deciding what everyone should do because that's what's been decided that *they* should do.

Japanese social structure is top-down, meaning that the guy (and it is 99.9% of the time a guy) occupying the highest spot in the hierarchy exclusively takes the reins. Everyone must

[381] Smoking is not taboo in the way that it is in the US, where all-caps warnings ("SMOKING KILLS!") cover half of a heavily-taxed package of cigarettes. In Japan, smoking in restaurants, bars, and especially clubs is entirely normal (although this does appear to be slowly changing to favor the preferences of non-smokers). Indeed, purchasing copious amounts of Febreeze to get the stench out of my clothes after shows became a regular, all-too-necessary part of my research budget.

treat this person with unequivocal respect, and defer to him in any way possible.[382] He gets to decide when to stop, what music to listen to, when and what we eat, how long the smoke break is, if we should take a scenic detour, if we stop at an electronics junk shop along the way, the topics of conversation… everything. There's no room for any discussion or compromise, either, as it would cause the hierarchy to implode. It'd be chaos, anarchy –with no rules in place, no one would know how to behave.

So since I had the Japan Railways Rail Pass and it was going to be free anyway, I opted to ride a series of trains down for my last bit of alone time for the next week, and met up with them at Matsuyama station. Immediately, the group decided to stop at a hot spring to refresh their energies. I'd normally welcome this proposition, except that it was too early. My hair has a particular routine and I didn't want to show up to the house with sopping drowned-rat-curls and no makeup[383], but at the same time, I didn't want to upset anyone by being a spoil-sport – even though no one asked me if I wanted to go in the first place.

I was a little on-edge that evening to begin with since, as a foreigner, meeting new groups of Japanese people can be stressful. Like the Hunger Games, your fate is decided in a moment, in this case when the Japanese people decide if they should talk to you normally, like you're a child, or in self-conscious English that prevents real conversation from happening.[384]

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[382] And the more creatively deferential you become, the more polite (and feminine) you're considered. Not that this isn't a useful lesson to learn, particularly for those of us brought up in America and other western societies where humility seems like an afterthought or bonus, but not a priority.

[383] It seems that wearing makeup in Japan is actually something of a social courtesy. From observation, the majority of Japanese women wear at least some (and many wear a lot), and it's considered shocking and lewd to be seen doing it in public (ala in a train) because the illusion – the mask, the 建前 *tatemae* -- is spoiled.

[384] Of course, most Japanese people are not normatively accustomed to hearing non-native Japanese, so it's entirely understandable why they might switch to English under the assumption that you must not understand much if you're having trouble producing grammatically perfect sentences. After many years, I've learned to accept

There's also that crucial initial few minutes when you asses where you belong in the hierarchy. Would this the kind of group where I'd have to insert myself at the very bottom to show that I understand how these things work in Japan/that they don't have to be afraid of me, or is this a more cosmopolitan crowd that's going to treat me like a regular person from the get-go? How polite will I have to be? Do I have to use ます/です *masu desu* or is plain form verb use acceptable?[385]

What ended up happening was that I was left out of the hierarchy establishment entirely. In fact, it was the worst-case scenario where not even the person sitting next to me initiated conversation, thus rendering me part-less as everyone else settled comfortably into their roles. When it was time to start grilling, all the women jumped up to get meat, veggies, seafood, and more beer for the guys. Desperate to feel like part of the group, I offered to help, but they told me to stay seated because I was "the guest."

So there I was, sitting with these dudes who were doing what Japanese dudes do -- performing their role according to the established hierarchy – and were thus lavishing each other with the appropriate level of attention, while ignoring the lowest two rungs on the ladder. Yep, me. The a) female b) foreigner. The ordering here is important, because if I were a *male* foreigner, they would have showered me with beer, been the first to offer me the tastiest items fresh off the bar-b-q, ask me questions, laugh at all my jokes even if none of them are

this as part-and-parcel of having a relationship with Japan: eventually, it comes down to laughing about it and finding the silver lining, or going totally insane with resentment, and I choose the former.

[385] Verbs in Japan are conjugated according to levels of politeness, the expectations of which change depending on where you are on the hierarchy.

actually funny, and treat me like the smartest, most interesting, most attractive person in the room.

Not that I would want that, at all. That kind of treatment is even more exclusionary, as it is entirely illusory, saccharine, fake. But as a woman -- and the yellow-haired elephant in the room a foot taller than anyone else at that -- I ended up sitting there quietly, wishing that this interaction could be more natural, and becoming increasingly aware of how awkward it was that I *still* hadn't said anything. Excluded though I was, I could also strongly sense that everyone was wondering why I wasn't participating, perhaps because foreigners are stereotyped as unwitting comedic relief, the scapegoat, laughably blind to the delicate balance of Japanese social relations: "Haha, I've got a funny story about ME relevant to this topic!" Not wanting to play the last-ditch role of the foreign minstrel, however, I sat silently in a mix of sadness, confusion, resentfulness and a deep sense of shame.

What did I do wrong?

It seemed that the best choice would be to excuse myself when I felt tears welling up, so that's what I did. I didn't want to embarrass myself any further, or worse, the friends who had brought me there.

--

All of You

Yeah, this is my favorite record of hers. It's really awesome, super smooth, especially the B side. We should listen to this one.

Thanks for the… approval?

Well, that's actually slightly out of context. It went more like this:

- Hey, Jiru-chan, you brought vinyl with you? Are you doing a show?
- I don't have special plans, but if there is an opportunity…
- Wow, these look pretty interesting. What kind of music is this?
- I have all kinds. This one (*The Golden Age of Benny Goodman*) is 1930s swing jazz, analog dance music. It's super fun.
- How about this one? (Charles Ives, *The Concord Sonata,* played by John Fitzpatrick)
- This is… a sort of crazy piano piece written by an insurance salesmen who composed music with… sudden transitions. He'll write a beautiful melody and then (splitting hand gesture) poof!
- Sounds cool. Let's put it on!
- Ummmm well, actually, you may not like it, it may not match your ears…
    - Yeah, yeah, that one's kind of… yeah, let's not listen to it.

Hey, you *don't get to say that about my music…*

- OK, well, how about this one? (Ahmad Jamal, *All of You*)
- Oh, I love this! He's a jazz pianist from the 1950's. It's--
    - Yeah, this is my favorite record of hers. It's really awesome, super smooth, especially the B side. We should listen to this one.

…

You haven't asked about once about the records that you've seen me hauling around for weeks, let alone set up an opportunity for me to play anywhere like I did for you when I brought you to the STates. This is the first time anyone's asked about *my* music the entire time I've been here, and yet you *still* found a way to make it about yourself.

Thanks for the... approval?

We listened to the record, but I couldn't enjoy it. It was no longer mine— instead, it was a reflection of *his sasuga* さすが (just like him, as always, true to form)[386] "good taste."

--

Exit, Act 1 of Many

Can't you see that I'm working for my show? Don't you ever think about anyone but yourself?!

That's funny, because I feel the same way. Is playing around on a synthesizer really more important than the fact that I came across the planet to be here with you?

Is one of us right, or are we actually both wrong?

--

The Kero Factory Show

[386] Interestingly, *sasuga* can also imply just the opposite. The word is a delicious example of how the Japanese language is ripe with opportunities to say something quite scathing while totally covering your tracks.

I opted for a cab from the *ryokan* 旅館 Japanese-style inn I was hooked up with in Dogo, downtown Matsuyama, right next to all the famous hot springs and the cute *shotengai* 商店街 arcades selling local knick-knacks. I couldn't stay with him anymore, waiting for him to come upstairs after drinking and smoking all night with his friends, and then sleeping all day while I twiddled my thumbs. After the last fight, I needed to get away from him—from everyone.

When we pulled up to the bar five minutes later, I was relieved to know that the show was within walking distance. Even though I've been going to these parties for years, pulling an all-nighter is still hard. There's a part of me that just doesn't see the point of it. Why do we have to do this at night? Is this just some masochistic routine that everyone else is actually enjoying? Every so often is fine, but to do this consistently? I mean, what about the next day? Besides, if I don't sleep, it's like a bear who hasn't hibernated for enough time. I like to have an escape route.

I didn't go to the show the night before because I was still too upset about everything, about coming down to Matsuyama for this stupid tour in the first place. And apparently, he was wrecked by the fact that I really didn't show up to his gig after all. Our friends were pushed to their limits, probably thinking that I'm just some crazy American girl who can't control her emotions and is downright masterful at ruining their harmless fun, but on the other hand admissive of the fact that he can be astoundingly insensitive, that I *did* come all the way here, and that he's not exactly the portrait of stability himself…

It was all just too much. The whole thing felt destroyed beyond repair.

But sometime early on the next evening, after wondering what to do, if I should just go back to Tokyo and call it quits, something changed…

What if I just enjoyed myself for the rest of the time on this trip? What were any of those fights really about, anyway? Is it possible that this has all been one giant cultural misunderstanding? Besides, I have a relationship to Japan independent of all this stuff, and I worked hard to come here. And I loved going to shows since before I met any of these people, and nothing's going to change that. I'm going to make the most of this time, hear some music that I can't hear back in the US, enjoy these people for who they are, let go, and just be in this moment.

When I walked in, everyone seemed surprised-- nervous if I was going to cause another emotional scene, perhaps, but also happy..? Anyway, there were smiles, hugs.

- You made it!!
- You're the researcher, right? I heard you were in town! Let's have a drink and talk!
- Wait, you're a researcher? You look like a model! Can we take a picture together?[387]

Yes. Feeling good.

Nursing a tequila shot (gratuitous, of course[388] – like pulling a true all-nighter and enjoying a party far into the next morning, tequila is an accidental indulgence), I soaked up the scene. What's underground Shikoku, the smallest and arguably most socially isolated of Japan's four main islands,[389] feel like?

[387] Wakako-chan, you're far to kind, and you're gorgeous yourself.
[388] Thank you, Mae-chan!
[389] Just ask Oe Kenazaburo.

A cozy, intimate basement space with a black-and-white checked linoleum floor. Low lights, an unironic disco ball. Older Japanese people with beards and dreadlocks who really love reggae and dub. Smiles, laughs, a refreshingly distinct lack of pretension. A DJ booth in the corner with a decent sound system and a small bar in the opposite corner. Mirrors for walls, with two standing tables against one, a couch against another. Above the DJ gear, a poster with three African American soul singers from the 1970s that echoes a different time, one when people connected over beautiful, fresh, funky, empowering music from the heart, when people got together, when people smiled, when there were no selfies or social media to distract from the now, when people were free, looking for real love, and danced.

So that's what we did.

(And yes, I walked back to my inn, but not until the party had ended the next morning).

The Matsuyama Beer Festival Show

The guys went with Miso-chan; I went with Mae-chan. They had to get there a little earlier to set up their gear, and we wanted to take our time getting dressed. Mae-chan's un-duplicable sense of style lead her, after much deliberation, to wear a t-shirt emblazoned with a graphic of Old Crow whiskey. It's a deliciously bold choice, not least because of its tomboy charm, but also because Japanese society's emphasis on appearance lends a particular importance to fashion. Indeed, this is one of my favorite parts about everyday life in Japan, where my somewhat wacky sense of balance is comparatively understood, perhaps even appreciated in a way that it can't be in American society. So, feeling good that day and excited to see the guys play an outside, casual set at the Matsuyama Beer Festival, I opted for

something more adventurous: an item I found right before coming on this trip that I wanted to bust out on a special occasion, when I was feeling especially confident.

After all, there's no other way to wear an oversized, hot pink romper from the 1980s except with total, unwavering belief that you can pull it off.

So obviously I stood out, and because I stick out anyway – and since Matsuyama is a town with almost no foreign presence to speak of, save for a small community of English teachers – all eyes were on me. And on this particular day, I really didn't care.

I know, I know, I get it, I'm fundamentally different, I'll never be one of you people or, you know, human or whatever, so I might as well just stick out as much as possible and give you what you want. Eat your heart out, because here comes an actual pink elephant!

The guys were getting synthesizers, laptops, and tablets ready for their gig in about an hour. After sampling local brews from around Shikoku and enjoying the equally un-duplicable festivity of Japanese day drinking,[390] we wandered over to say hi.

However, we were quickly intercepted.

- Hello! Hello! Very beautiful. Where you from?

Ugh, really? I don't have energy for this. Time to fall back on the classic routine.

- Sorry, I don't speak English.

[390] Perhaps because Japan doesn't have any open container laws, and because drinking in public places during the daytime is far more socially acceptable than it is in the U.S., celebrations ranging from outdoor festivals to cherry blossom viewing often prominently feature alcohol as a central node in the activities. It's fun, liberating, and feels delightfully rebellious, like getting tipsy with your parents.

- あれ？英語で話してる！日本語話せるの？(Huh? You're speaking in English! Do you speak Japanese?)
- 日本語分かりません。(I don't understand Japanese.)
- あれ？？(HUH??)

And I walked away.

Flabbergasted, this guy clearly didn't get the hint and instead joined the guys, who were watching this go down with unbridled amusement. He sits down with them on some milk crates and starts asking questions: Who is she? Where is she from? How do you know her? Does she have a boyfriend? However, the guys play along with this and actually answer his questions, which leaves me a bit confused. Are they flirting with him on my behalf or something? Why aren't they just telling him to go away? Is this not considered creepy in Japan? I basically told this creep to get lost, so why has he elected to further invade my social space? Does he not think I'm serious? Are this total stranger's feelings more important to my friends than mine?

Taking matters into my own hands, I turned around and marched up to this broseph.

- Hey, what are you still doing here? Why are you talking to my friends?

The guys burst out laughing. I'm sure I broke dozens of social taboos in an instant, but I didn't care. It's not like I yelled at him or hit him or did anything else that would be clearly inappropriate; I was just standing up for myself. Besides, why is the *man* here allowed to push social limits, but not the woman? For this particular situation, I had made a snap decision that I didn't actually mind reinforcing the crippling stereotype that American women are "aggressive"

compared to Japanese women.[391] And the guys were loving every minute of this. Apparently, so did this dude, who looked at me with an expression of fear, yes, but also lust, disbelief, and utter amazement.

Naturally, I was rendered even more disgusted. What's it take for a guy to back off this country? Leave me alone, the purpose of my existence is most certainly not to function as an ideal accessory for male social interactions! That's when Mae-chan grabbed me by the arm and escorted me away, laughing, but reminding me:

- Jiru, Jiru… we girls don't do that in Japan.

Why not?

[391] This stereotype is very psychologically damaging to many foreign women living in Japan. Japanese women are considered more feminine, and thus more attractive, not only to most Japanese men, but also to most of the foreign men living in Japan as well. Broad strokes aside, my hunch – informed by almost four years in Japan – is that many foreign women feel like disgusting mammoths after realizing that the odds of being treated like an attractive, valuable woman in the three-dimensional world are woefully stacked in other favors.

The Celebrity

For Juan-kun

"Jiru!"

Her voice was deeply emphatic. She had only met me once before at a party in Tokyo in the haunt where I logged the most hours during my "fieldwork" – in quotations because, by the end of that year, what had begun as research became my off-duty social life. It was at the party where all the groups and DJs I had followed for nearly a year happened to be doing a show together at my favorite spot, and even though I had since moved to Osaka to finish up my time as a formal researcher, I showed up three hours and a fourteen-thousand yen bullet train ride later.

It was immediately clear that she was there with one of the night's most notorious performers, the ring leader of the scene. That night, though, he had replaced his usual "too cool to be here" attitude while hiding in the corner with his hood up and his iPad (and a fat blunt) out with a subtle, nearly mocking pride that this woman was here with him. Although I'd never seen her at a show before, she didn't look shy or tentative like many newcomers do. She blazed with an otherworldly confidence as she danced wildly in front of the speakers, hair flying in all directions – all while wearing a bizarre white pajama onsie, no less.

The show was good, but around the time the acid tabs were handed out (there was a moment's hesitation when they reached me before ultimately not offering any) I was reminded of the reasons I had chosen to leave Tokyo earlier that summer—the alienation, the extreme polarity between the world out there and the world in the club, how "cool" everyone tries to be

in the Mad City, the nearly blind reverence of a reckless, nearly total abandon of society and self… it had all been too much. At a certain point I just couldn't connect with that lifestyle and realized, one day in the springtime, I'd become just another jaded soul drifting half-awake through the Concrete Jungle. Somewhat disappointed on principle but very much relieved in practice that I wasn't included in this inner-sphere ritual of casual hard-drug use, I sipped my consolatory drink on the bar stool, meditating on the year I'd spend in Japan, and ideas of friendship.

Maybe friendship can describe the relationship you have with the people you play music with.

Maybe friendship can describe the relationship you have with the people you do drugs with.

Maybe a friendship can describe a relationship where one person cares more than the other, and maybe that's OK.

After the show started to wind down and the trains started running again – and after catching a few z's in my trademark spot behind the soundproof door -- I went outside for a breath of fresh air to gather myself before saying goodbye. BOOM: there she was, standing with who was now obviously her boyfriend – that "too cool" narcissistic ring leader of the scene. He then took it upon himself to introduce me as best as he could, given that he was perpetually fried from dropping way too much acid:

- Hey, hey, this is Jiru. She researches underground music and she's come to practically all our shows, ha. And she also does like, traditional music, it's so crazy.

What do you do again, Okinawa? Or… Hokkaido? Shit, what was it again? Hey, Jiru, you should really check out Okinawan traditional music. It's so sick.

It continually struck me as funny that this dude, who prioritized synthesizers and drugs above nearly all else in his life -- the kind of person who invited me to a secret mountain rave with his group when I didn't even know him then ignored me for two solid months after I rejected his sexual advances but still wanted to go to his shows, and then suddenly treated me like a chummy pal after declaring, with approving laughter, that I was *atama okashii* 頭おかしい ("sick in the head") -- always took it upon himself to explain my research to people. Also interesting is that he paid particular attention not to my work in the underground, but to my interests in traditional music. The absurdity was always compounded by the fact that he could never remember what traditional music I researched, which led to nearly identical stream-of-consciousness conclusions that I should check out Okinawan traditional music if it wasn't what I was already studying.

He must have told me to study Okinawan traditional music on at least three separate occasions.

- Haha, thanks… um, I actually practice a *bon odori* (Buddhist dance) in Akita prefecture. Nice to meet you. What's your name?

As she introduced herself, strong eye-contact and mysterious smile belied an immediate affection; it was clear that she had taken some kind of liking to me. And so, half tipsy and half asleep, I blurted out:

- Hey, I like your outfit. Is that a onsie? Haha!

Excited by a brief exchange about onsies and shopping in Tokyo, I then pulled out the big guns:

- I love thrift shopping. In America they have these huge junk shops and you can find anything there. See my shorts? I made them from a pair of Lucky brand jeans that I got for three dollars! Do you know Lucky Jeans? They say "Lucky" on the inside of the fly! You can see!"

… and that's the story of when I unbuttoned my jeans for a celebrity without knowing it.

… the only circumstances under which that could have possibly happened.

I didn't find out she was a celebrity until later that summer, while having lunch with a friend who filled me in. Not only was she a celebrity, she explained, but was quickly becoming a full-blown star—she's been in commercials, advertisements, and even appears in gossip magazines. Ah, corporate sponsorship: how you know you've hit the bigtime! A part of me was embarrassed recalling the first impression I must have left, but another, bigger part found it to be hilariously perfect.

Later that summer, I sojourned four hours one-way to a sleepy countryside town to say a final goodbye to the same Tokyo crew, who, according to social media and a brief message exchange from the scene's most friendly liaison, had made their way down to western Japan for a show/vacation at a tiny club nestled between a tire shop and a possibly defunct café. After their first trip down there in January, the aforementioned ring leader had since described it as

the “best place in Japan.” Slightly regretting making the long trip out to say goodbye to a bunch of people who were probably blacked-out on booze and drugs anyway, I finally arrived -- and there she was. Her face lit up when I tentatively walked in and, although I had only met her once before, I was happy to see a smiling face among a group that was otherwise totally wasted, passed out in the grass at 4:30 in the afternoon, and coming down from what was very likely a two-day acid bender.

“Jiru!”

Not really feeling the vibe of the party, a suspicion I had long held about this scene solidified: they were just hipsters who were trying to make it big. Whatever underground principles about anti-capitalism and being true to yourself they might have had were clearly secondary to petty rebellion and posturing. So, only a few minutes after arriving, and not having time for any of that nonsense, I decided to say goodbye to the cognizant and make my way back to the station to get back to Osaka. The nicest part of that whole excursion was seeing her.

We clicked, you know?

--

Later on, we became friends on Facebook and even sent each other a few messages. Sure, she didn’t mind if I talked about her group in my class back at Cornell; since she had already been formally interviewed by MTV, she didn’t need to be interview by my little fellowship blog. Definitely, let her know the next time I’m in Japan. Which I did, but either she was in Hokkaido, or in Singapore, or was just too busy, but maybe next time. Yet there never

seemed to be the right time, and so I began to realize that this was a classic case of Japanese rejection: just say you're busy enough times, and eventually they'll get the hint and stop contacting you.

So that's what I did.

Maybe being a celebrity means you just don't have the time for or interest in making new friends.

Maybe being a celebrity means that you don't trust people who'd like to be friends with you.

Or maybe being a celebrity means wishing people would actually just be real with you, but if they get a little star struck then you can't be bothered.

Maybe this all makes for a funny story, and maybe some encounters are best left as once-in-a-lifetime.

And maybe that's OK.

Epilogue: On Processing Experience

When I began my fieldwork in the late summer of 2014, I had no idea what would unfold. In fact, if you had told me that I'd get adopted by three dancers up in Akita, go to a secret raves and get invited to parties across the country for years, meet celebrities and living legends, stay out all night dancing on a regular basis, interview government officials, and become hopelessly involved with the underground world as a dancer, something of an It-Girl, and even a performer—I probably wouldn't have believed you. Yet here we are.

From a theoretical standpoint, I also had no idea how my project would develop, but I knew that it would take me by surprise. Even as my field sites became clearly defined, I certainly wasn't expecting to arrive at the conclusion that traditional and underground music cultures had anything concrete in common. Yet here we are.

It took me a while to process this whirlwind year of fieldwork in Japan; in fact, I didn't start writing my dissertation until a year after I had settled back in the United States. It wasn't that I didn't want to; it was that I needed to let things percolate. It was all so fresh. I understood why traditional and underground music scenes were linked for me – they were the two worlds where I found a home for myself during that year – but I didn't yet understand how. And I knew aesthetics had something to do with it, but I similarly didn't yet know how.

And *now* here we are: at the end of the dissertation. I'll admit that it's hard to come up with things to say— besides, I never know how to end things. Haven't I said enough? This dissertation is giant, and I'm sure that the points I've been making about aesthetics of

capitalism and resistance are not only clear, but probably redundant. That's why I'm a bit reticent to say anything more about the analysis here in the epilogue.

All the same, reflecting on how and why I came to these conclusions has brought me back to the subject of dance—and to the idea of process. During his visit to Cornell in the spring of 2016, legendary ethnomusicologist Kofi Agawu said to me that separating music and dance is impossible—and waxed that one can't ever really understand music *without* dance. In contrast, in December of 2017, the similarly legendary ethnomusicologist Alison Tokita McQueen – upon reading a draft of the traditional music chapter – simply remarked, "This seems to be more about dance than it is about music. I'm not sure what I can add to your project."

Although I worked under the guidance of Professor Tokita in Japan this past fall, I agree with Professor Agawu. Beyond formal discussions of embodiment, I, too, believe that there's just something about dance inherently inseparable from music. It's at once personal – a physical, third-dimensional processing of the otherwise abstract and elusive music – and social: there's a transference between whoever's producing and receiving these sound that's deeply intimate, just like musical performance.

And when you're in a group, dancing with others and to a group of musicians together? That's paradise.

In fact, Kai Fikentscher's research on underground dance music similarly explore this idea of paradise. In '*You Better Work!': Underground Dance Music in New York City,* he writes: "On the dance floor of New York underground clubs, the idea of 'paradise' has been repeatedly invoked or pursued in song and dance, to contrast it with that other nonparadise, the world

outside, with its persistent social inequalities and violent conflicts."[392] Of course, he's talking about the famous Paradise Garage club of New York City lore, and the references to an idea of paradise that largely defined the deep house music scene of the 1980s and '90s. And while his study explores underground New York, the overall narrative that dance can create an otherworldy paradise is, broadly, the central thesis of my dissertation on music in contemporary Japan. In Nishimonai, this world might be co-opted by neonationalist interests, but no matter which way that pie is sliced it's still a paradise—a contrast to the Aeon Malls, the concrete, the recession, the loss of identity. And in underground Japan – where the same ideas of paradise that even Fikentscher discusses are relished with a mix of bitterness that it's no longer the norm, and a sort of longing nostalgia for a time long passed[393] -- dance is central to the resistance efforts. Because, at the end of the day, there simply isn't a true dance culture with J-pop, except for the choreographed unison… which ultimately proves my point about its capitalistic – indeed, fascist – aesthetic.

It's through dance that I was able to theoretically conceptualize this project in the manner presented here.

Personally speaking, what made dance "paradise" during that year – and in all of my subsequent trips back to Japan, which have all centered on dance as well – is that I felt like I could be free. Let's be clear, Japan is not accommodating for someone of my stature; stretching my limbs and getting it all out in my secret spots in Tokyo and Osaka were necessary for my well-being. Dancing in Nishimonai… to be a part of something so beautiful, so treasured, and to

[392] Fikentscher, *'You Better Work!',* 62,

[393] Some friends in Japan even organize a party called "Paradise Garage" (or maybe it's "Garadise Parage?") that features all deep-house cuts.

have had such mystically transcendent experiences – space and time blurred and obscured – is something I value so much that I've spent probably close to ten thousand dollars, if not more, to participate in the festival for three years and counting. Together, these dance experiences became different, yet parallel sites of negotiation: a way of navigating Japan's complex relationship with time and space, in that its at once an ancient, yet futuristic society. Indeed, Fikentscher notes: "Dancing can have an educational function, enacting the way one thinks about oneself as a gendered human being, and/or about others who may belong to a different ethnic group, and may express a different sexual orientation… it can also question nor even subvert these constructs ever so playfully."[394]

It was certainly educational for me.

And once I make it to the next level, I definitely want to get my paws on the *hanui* hand-placed kimonos that cost $3000 that my *sempai*s wear.

After coming back to the United States, I felt irrevocably transformed. That's part of why I couldn't write anything for a year (and, you know, teaching a First-Year Writing Seminar that [happily] took up most of my time). The underground opened my eyes in a way that I couldn't undo; Nishimonai haunted me—in a good way. Gradually, I found myself seeking out parties here in Ithaca, taking dance classes… and, later, throwing dance parties myself, and even taking to the subways to dance there: to try and make people happy, to open people's eyes in the same way that mine were opened. Through dance, the divide between personal and professional began to blur, and dancing became an important site of negotiation here in

[394] Fikentscher, *'You Better Work!',* 65.

America, as well: a navigation between my identity as a serious researcher on one side of the Pacific, and a dancer on the other side. And as dance has continued to add so much light to my life, I've wondered…

How did I just only realize how much I love -- nay, *need* – to dance?

Returning to solipsistic ethnographic theory: the preceding dissertation is not a definitive exploration of space-time relationships, sociality, or even capitalism and resistance in contemporary Japan. While it explore these topics, my dissertation is perhaps more accurately conceived as a diary of my life in Japan—the galvanized intellectual prowess of a person who has long dreamed of faraway places, has long been suspicious and critical of capitalism (or what I simply thought of as "money" back in high school), has dedicated her life to scholarship, has been a life-long musician, and then, suddenly, a dancer…

This dissertation, then, is a confluence of circumstances that are, apparently, uniquely my own. Feeling as though this initial year of fieldwork in Japan aligned me with what seems to be my destiny, I've come to see dance as a process: not only bodily, not only musical, but a mental process as well… the process through which I understand how Nishimonai and the underground world are actually linked as a resistance to the disciplining, mechanized, and ultimately capitalist aesthetic of J-pop.

Which, in these three chapters, I have attempted to show is a logical conclusion—even if it is not "objective."

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